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July 23, 1895.

No. 939.

\$2.50
a Year.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS.
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 cents.

Vol. XXXVII.



DESERT DAN MADE NO ATTEMPT TO GUIDE OR CONTROL THE FLYING WILD STALLION.

Kit Bandy's "Star" Engagement;

OR,

Desert Dan, the Saddle Prince of the
Rio Hondo.

A Romance of New Mexico.

BY OLL COOMES,

AUTHOR OF "KIT BANDY'S BRIGADE IN ARIZONA," "WHIP KING JO," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE FUGITIVE'S DYING STORY.

In the Trinchera Mountains of New Mexico burns a camp-fire, around which are seated five men. All but one, a young Mexican, are Americans. They are prospectors, and the Mexican is their guide.

Captain Rufus Clarke, a man of forty years, is the acknowledged leader of the party. He is the eldest of the five.

During the War for the Union, Captain Clarke had served the Federal cause in the army on the southwestern plains. He was, therefore, an old Indian-fighter, and was, in truth, a natural born lover of adventure.

While in the army many and extravagant were the stories he had heard of the rich gold deposits in Trinchera and other mountains of the Southwest, but that the fierce hostilities of the savages and roving bands of outlaws and bushwhackers made it impossible to work the mines.

But the reported death of Captain Vulcan in Arizona, and the breaking up of his band of Desert Pirates, emboldened the adventuresome captain, and, with a party of three friends and a trusty guide, "Hualpa" José, Clarke set out to search for the fabled mines of Trinchera.

And on that early April evening, when the little party went into camp, they believed themselves to be the only human beings within the solitude of the mountains, but before the night had fairly drawn her misty mantle over the hills, a shadowy human form staggered out of the darkness, and fell, with a moan, within the camp-fire's radius of light.

And that fainting form was that of a woman! Quickly Captain Clarke sprang to her side, and lifting her drooping form, laid it upon a couch of blankets. She had fainted from sheer weakness and exhaustion apparently.

Brandy was administered, while brow and throbbing temples were bathed with water, and thus treated, she soon regained consciousness; and when at length she realized that she was among friends, the following startling story was related to the anxious listeners:

"My name is Carlita Bond. My mother was a Mexican lady and my father an American gentleman. I am thirty-five years of age. Fifteen years ago I was married to an American ranchero named Joshua Bond. He had a friend in one Horace Mead. Señor Mead married a Spanish lady friend of mine at Santa Fé. Our husbands went into the Trinchera Mountains to search for gold—one of a party of fifteen. Señor Mead's wife and I accompanied them, for we were full of life, and adventuresome. We traveled on horseback, carrying mining tools and supplies on pack-animals. Señor Mead had a sweet little daughter whom he called Dolly. She was a great pet of the party.

"In time we reached the mountains, and found a gold deposit that was rich in nuggets and dust. We soon had in our possession great wealth, and started on our return trip to Santa Fé. On our way we were attacked by a large band of Indians. We sought refuge in an arroyo. The savages surrounded us, determined upon our capture or death. In the second attack my husband, and Señor Mead's wife, and two others were killed, and three of the men were wounded. But the foe were at length repulsed. Señor Mead went almost wild over the death of his wife, and as he looked upon his crying, motherless child, but three years old, he declared he would take her life with his own hand before she should fall into the savages' power alive. She was a dear, sweet baby.

"Before the third attack by the foe was made, a wounded Indian who had fallen near the arroyo, crawled into our defense begging for mercy and water. But we had no water for ourselves. The fellow proved to be a white man

in disguise. He had a talk with Señor Mead, and then died in awful spasms. Señor Mead became very pale. The man had told him that the leader of the Indians was a white man who had been a great friend of my husband and Señor Mead! But Señor Mead never told me who that false friend was. He became almost frantic, and wept like a child.

"Finally he came to me with a tiny gold locket that he had taken from Dolly's neck and said: 'Carlita, I have placed in this locket a brief history of this attack, the name of the traitor leading it, and I'm going to place it in the shoulder of Black Boy in hopes it may fall into friendly hands some day and our death be avenged.'

"Black Boy was a two-year-old colt, the property of my husband, who was a great lover of horses. Black Boy was a noble young horse, of American breed, that promised to be one of the fleetest in the South. The colt had been permitted to follow at will without restraint of the halter. He had never been ridden.

"After leaving me, I saw Señor Mead and two other men catch the colt and put a saddle on his back. Then I saw him take a long-bladed knife and run the sharp steel downward under the skin on the black colt's shoulder. Then into the pocket thus made he placed the tiny locket and fastened the mouth of the incision with a pin.

"The poor colt was maddened with pain, but it was held firmly by a cruel twist upon its jaw. The next thing the señor did was to take his sweet Dolly and tie her firmly and securely in the saddle on that colt's back; then he kissed her and bade her farewell, and turned the animal loose!

"Suffering with pain in its shoulder, and terrified by the crying child upon its back, the young stallion darted out of the arroyo and away across the plain as no horse ever ran before. The Indians gave chase. Señor Mead watched them, and when he saw the black colt leave them far behind he burst into a wild, terrible laugh. Señor Mead had gone stark, raving mad!

"In the next attack upon us all were killed but myself. I alone was permitted to live, to suffer twelve years because I would not reveal to the murderers the whereabouts of the Trinchera gold-mine. I resolved to die rather than give them the secret, and for twelve years have I been a slave in the Apache camp, and almost daily reminded by some white villain that my liberty would be given me for the secret of the hidden mine.

"As to whatever became of the black stallion and Dolly Mead I never heard. A week ago I escaped from the Indian village, and have been wandering through the hills ever since, starving, suffering—dying!"

This was the story the poor wanderer told, and it filled the breasts of the gold-hunters with deepest sympathy and sorrow.

Horace Mead, of her story, had been a school-mate and army comrade of Captain Rufus Clarke away back in Iowa, and the story of his tragic death filled the captain's heart not only with sadness, but inspired a spirit of revenge, for he exclaimed:

"Men, I can go no further until this matter has been investigated, and if that poor woman's words are proven true, and the murderers can yet be found, Horace Mead's death shall be avenged! There is a black horse now running wild at the head of a herd on the plains south of the Rio Hondo. It has been there, and on the Canadian and Pecos rivers for several years, and no horse-hunter has been able to catch it. It may be Black Boy—the colt that carried Mead's child away to life or death—and if so, it may have encysted in its shoulder the name of Horace's murderer, and a clew to the Trinchera mines."

Carlita Bond died that same night in the gold-hunters' camp, and was tenderly buried by the adventurers.

The next morning when the sun dispelled the gloom, Hualpa José, the Mexican guide, was found missing from camp, and a day's waiting for his return was spent in vain. The fellow had deserted them!

Why? Was he more than a traitor—a spy and an enemy?

Captain Clarke and his three companions faced about and started to retrace their steps northward. Poor Carlita's story had changed them from gold-hunters into avengers.

CHAPTER II.

THE SADDLE PRINCE.

A JULY day on the plains of New Mexico.

Two-score wild-horses grazing on the plateau—a vulture circling in the upper deep.

Two horsemen riding from under cover of the banks of an arroyo entered a cluster of stunted piñons and there drew rein.

One of the horsemen is a youth, apparently not over eighteen. He is slender in form, but athletic, with a noble, manly countenance, and dark-brown eyes, bright and flashing as those of a hawk. He is dressed in the garb of a ranchero. He is well armed, and mounted upon a little bay mare whose speed had brought her young master fame.

Thus appears Desert Dan, the Prince of the Lasso and Saddle of the Rio Hondo.

The man at his side is Don Alvarde Vaca, the owner of the "Aztec Ranch" on the Rio Hondo. He is a Spanish American of some five-and-forty years, with a black-bearded face, and a dark eye deep-set beneath heavy, sullen brows.

As soon as the two had gained the cover of the piñons they dismounted. Desert Dan threw aside his sombrero to cool his heated brow, while Don de Vaca, field-glass in hand, advanced to the edge of the chaparral and searched the plain before him. As his gaze finally settled upon the herd of wild horses some two miles away, an exclamation of joy burst from his lips.

"Señor Dan, my boy, come here!" he called, turning to Desert Dan; "I have at last sighted the object of our search, Black Robber, the wild stallion. He is not over two miles from us, and stands with head erect as if already suspecting or scenting danger. Ah! but he is a royal beauty!"

Desert Dan took the glass and brought it to bear upon the ebony stallion that for years had defied the fleetest horse and shrewdest ranchero on the ranges. He was a coal black and much larger than the average wild horse. In fact, he was evidently an American bred beast, of noble blood, which had strayed from some ranch, and, joining a wild herd, had become its leader and the wildest of them all. From the Canadian to the Pecos River he was known as Black Robber, for it was said he had tolled away to the plains scores of horses from the ranches and corrals.

Upon Black Robber Don Alvar had set his heart, but the dozen men he had sent to capture him had failed, and, as a last recourse, he sent for Desert Dan, whose field of operations had been in the northern part of the Territory. But the youth's reputation as a ranchero, his marvelous feats with the lasso, and phenomenal powers in subduing and mastering wild animals, had reached his ears, and if all was true, he thought, surely Desert Dan can take and subdue Black Robber.

"By ginkrickies!" the boy exclaimed, his handsome face lighting up with a look of admiration, as he regarded the black stallion with aid of the glass, "he is a royal beauty, sure enough!—sleek as a deer and supple as a snake! What a body! what limbs! what a neck and head! Oh, Peter! won't it be immense to stride his glossy, round back!"

"I hope you will be able to do it, Dan," Don Alvar said, "for no one has, as yet, been able to do so. I have offered five different men five hundred dollars to bring me that horse, and now, my boy, I'll double that and give you one thousand dollars the day you ride him into Aztec Ranch. If, however, you have any doubts of your ability to cope with the robber, don't take any risks. Where strong, experienced men fail it doesn't seem that a stripling of a boy could succeed."

Desert Dan broke into a low, pleasant laugh. "I fear nothing, señor," he said, "in the shape of horseflesh; and I have never met the animal yet that I was unable to subdue. But that's not saying I can catch Black Robber, nor subdue him if caught; but I can try awful hard. One thousand dollars is worth a big effort, to say nothin' of the royal fun that goes with chasing and riding an ungovernable wild horse. But, señor, I see moving objects away off on the plain beyond the horses that look like horsemen, though I'm not certain they are."

The boy handed the glass, as he spoke, to Don de Vaca, who quickly raised it to his eyes, but before he could bring it to bear on the objects, they had disappeared from view.

"It may be a party of rancheeros, and it might be a band of freebooters—Desert Pirates, roving around in search of plunder," suggested the ranchman.

"Then the Desert Pirates are still on the go?" asked Dan.

"Yes; the death of Captain Vulcan in Arizona last fall did not destroy the gang operating in New Mexico. Horse and cattle-stealing, train-robberies and marauding go on just about the same as ever. White men, Indians and Mexicans are, it is said, working together.

They steal and plunder in Mexico and carry their booty to the United States, and from here they run their plunder over into Mexico. But the party you saw may be horse-hunters like ourselves. There's a dozen ranch-owners who covet the Black Robber, for he would be worth thousands at the head of their herds."

"By ginkrickies!" exclaimed the Saddle Prince, "I hope no one will meddle with the horse till I get a shy at him; and for fear it was a party of horse-hunters, I'm goin' to say good-by to you, señor, and pull out. Now, I may not see you again for a week or a month, and I may be around to-night or to-morrow. If I cannot catch the horse by a bold dash, I'll follow him day and night until I can get him into a canyon or some corner where I can rope him."

Desert Dan mounted his horse, adjusted his lariat, tightened his belt, and again saying good-by to Don de Vaca, rode out from the chaparral and down toward the grazing herd.

By this time the horses were out of sight, behind a swell in the plain, grazing up the wind.

Don de Vaca, watching the fearless youth from his covert on the bank of the arroyo, his face wearing an eager, anxious expression, saw him disappear behind the swell that shut the wild horses from view.

Desert Dan swept over the rise and was within forty rods of the herd when Black Robber espied him, gave a snort of alarm, and wheeling, dashed away like the wind, followed by his wild mates.

The stampede was now on, and Desert Dan was in all his glory.

CHAPTER III. A DOUBLE CHASE.

THE arroyo, on the banks of which Don de Vaca and Desert Dan parted, lay south of the Rio Hondo. It ran through the great pasture lands of the vast herds of stock belonging to the ranches located at intervals along the Hondo for the distance of a hundred miles. Beyond this range to the south, the plain became sandy, broken and seamed with canyons and the dry channels of streams. On this mesa, stretching away to the Sacramento Mountains, cacti, sagebrush and greasewood predominated.

Down across the grass lands and into the great desert toward the south, Black Robber, the beautiful wild stallion, led his band of followers, and on behind, at a measured swinging gallop, followed the young Saddle Prince.

Don de Vaca watched until he saw the wild herd and the gallant pursuer disappear beyond the rim of the horizon; then he remounted and started homeward.

Deeper and deeper into the desert pursued the young horse-hunter. He did not attempt to crowd upon the herd, but only aimed to keep it in sight and on the move until it should take to a canyon or the channel of an arroyo. But, the ebony steed was a wary and cunning beast. He had been chased so often that he instinctively seemed to anticipate the wishes of his pursuers and thereby elude capture.

Hot the noontide sun beat down upon Desert Dan's head, but, both he and the noble mare he bestrode were accustomed to the fierce heat of the desert, and the occasional hot winds that swept up from the south like the breath of a furnace.

The Saddle Prince knew nothing of the extent of the desert into which he was riding. All the country south of the Rio Hondo was new to him. But, for that he cared nothing. He made no note of his course, nor of the hours passing. He had but one object in view—the capture of Black Robber. The honor of that feat would be more to him than the great reward offered by Don de Vaca.

For hours the pursuit continued. The pursuer did not gain materially on the wild horses, nor did he permit the distance to widen between them.

Around many canyons and across an occasional arroyo the herd sped on, Desert Dan at times cutting across lots and thereby husbanding his horse's strength.

Ten, twenty, and, for all the Saddle Prince knew, thirty miles were left behind, and still he rode on with the dogged patience of an Indian trailer.

Finally he saw the herd suddenly disappear from view as if swallowed up in the earth.

Urging on his mare he soon discovered that the wild horses had dropped into a depression trending off toward the southwest. Following on, the depression deepened into a valley and then to a canyon.

The discovery of this fact greatly encouraged the boy. In fact, it was just what he had hoped for, although he knew nothing of the nature of

the canyon, nor whether it would afford him any advantage in his pursuit of the wild horses.

Two or three miles' ride up the defile brought the pursuer to where the walls on either side of him had become high and precipitous, the space between narrowing and widening at intervals with now and then a fringe of cottonwoods or cedars.

Dan now gained slightly upon the wild herd, though it was not his aim to crowd it too hard until the proper time for a rush.

The winding of the canyon at times brought the sun full in his face, and then the shadows of the walls first upon his right and then the left; and thus in and out of the light and shadows he swung, patient, tireless, hopeful.

Suddenly his horse threw up its head and turned it slightly to one side, as though it had detected something approaching from behind.

Dan glanced back over his shoulder. He started with a cry of surprise at what he saw. Not over a hundred yards behind he saw a score of outlaws—white men and savages—wheel into the canyon from a by-way and ride furiously toward him, yelling like demons and firing revolvers.

As a dozen bullets whistled over and around him, the young horse-hunter realized that his situation was precarious—that the pursuer had become the pursued. He had a carbine hanging to his saddle and a pair of revolvers in his belt, and he resolved to make the best of the situation. There was no turning back, nor to either side now, and a sudden termination of the canyon—something he had been wishing for—would make his chances entirely hopeless.

Despite the odds against him, the boy manifested no fear. On the contrary, he drew his revolver, brandished it above his head, and sent back a yell of defiance to the robber-gang.

It was not the first time he had been confronted by such danger. A year before he had received his baptism of fire in a conflict with Apaches. He had been wounded at the first fire of the foe, but fought on until the Indians had been routed. He was as marvelous in the use of the pistol as the lasso, and in this skill now depended all hopes of escape from the pursuing foe.

For the next hour an exciting race ensued. The outlaws gained little upon the boy, but kept up a random firing, and with each fusillade came a demoniac yell.

Desert Dan, urging his horse to renewed exertions, gained upon the wild horses that were now being impeded in their flight by the contracting walls of the canyon. Had the boy been familiar with the true nature of the canyon, he could have made his calculations accordingly, but, as it was, he was compelled to meet every emergency just as it arose.

The lad gained more rapidly upon the wild horses than his pursuers did upon him. The narrowness of the canyon in places accounted for this, and as they sped on this difficulty seemed to increase. Once the herd became wedged between the narrow walls, and Desert Dan was at their very heels before they had extricated themselves.

Bullets from the outlaws' weapons were still coming Dan's way, and suddenly his horse gave a quick snort and shake of the head, which was followed by a new burst of speed. Then, as the noble mare began to show signs of lameness, the boy knew she had been hit with a bullet, and that the race must soon come to an end.

The sight of the canyon walls coming close together some distance ahead set the young ranchero to thinking. He urged on his faithful little mare. They were crowding close upon the wild herd, when the latter reached the narrow space, and a blockade ensued. The herd became jammed in between the walls, and Dan dashed up to the heels of the snorting, squealing, struggling mass. He ran his eyes over the herd. He saw Black Robber well forward, to all appearances the very key to the jam.

A few of the terrified animals backed out when Dan rode up, turned and started away down the canyon. The boy fired off his revolver and shouted aloud in hopes of breaking the jam; but all in vain.

The outlaws and savages were now coming close, yelling and shouting like fiends. It was a terrible moment for the Prince of the Saddle. He could not go forward, back, to either side. But his fertile brain was the most active when danger was most imminent. A thought flashed through it—a very dangerous expedient, but the only one now open to him for escape.

Black Robber was still in the jam, with two or three horses on either side of him, and suddenly rising to his feet in his saddle, Desert Dan made a leap for the stallion, springing over the

backs of the struggling animals between. Nimble as a young panther and sure-footed, the daring boy landed squarely astride the black.

The stallion, terrified by the presence of a man upon his back, uttered a sound, half-neigh, half-groan, crouched down like a tiger gathering for a spring and then, with a fierce snort, leaped into the air as if in an effort to go over the backs of his followers. His powerful lunge was the means of breaking the blockade and he shot forward like a meteor, and dashed furiously away up the canyon, a rider upon his round, sleek back—a rider he could no more dislodge by his frantic leaps and cavortings than the flowing mane upon his slender neck, to which the fearless young ranchero clung.

Away with the speed of the wind flew the herd, the frightened and maddened black, however, leading by many lengths and gaining at every single bound.

With yells of dismay and a volley of shots the outlaws came on in hot pursuit.

A mile or two further on the canyon began to widen and the walls became less precipitous—gradually falling away on either side and sloping upward to the mesa.

Desert Dan made no attempt to guide or control the flying wild stallion. He had left his lasso on his saddle, and had not so much as a string with which to restrain the horse.

The outlaws and the herd were soon left far behind, and finally the game and tireless desert steed bolted up out of the canyon and headed across the dismal waste, stretching far away to the southwest!

By this time the sun had dropped to the summit of the Sacramento Mountains, and now blazed full in the face of the boy; but this for only a few minutes, and then the shadows of night were flung out and the great expanse was mantled in darkness.

Yet still on into the night and the arid waste sped the black stallion and the young desert rider, the Boy Saddle Prince of the Rio Hondo.

CHAPTER IV.

MYSTERIES OF THE DESERT.

THE moon hung full and bright in the midnight sky, and flooded the desert with a soft, dreamy light. Only the occasional cry of a distant wolf, or the soft whirr of a nocturnal wing disturbed the ear of the lonely horseman that was drifting southward over the plain in the direction of the Sacramento Mountains.

The horseman was Desert Dan, and he and Black Robber still held to the companionship formed in the distant canyon. The rider was hatless and his face begrimed with dust. The horse was still without bridle or saddle, and moved along at its own pleasure and in its own course. But alas! it is not the spirited, gamy stallion upon which we saw the sun go down. It moves along now at a swinging walk, its neck in line with the back and the head slightly drooping. Its spirit had been subdued by the indomitable Prince of the Saddle.

No longer does the horse object to the presence of the rider upon his back. It hears the sound of his voice speaking kindly to it and is no longer affrighted. It feels the touch of his hand kindly stroking its mane and flinches not.

Animal instinct has succumbed to the superior intelligence and power of man. Desert Dan is master of Black Robber!

But, Dan has no means by which to guide the animal. He knows not the extent of the desert nor into what danger he may be drifting. Yet, for all that, he lets the horse take its own course. Somewhere he knew their tramp would end, and if that end brought trouble it would be time enough to meet it then.

It was a lonely ride, however, down that desert, and Dan began to keenly feel the pangs of thirst and hunger. But endurance and fortitude were characteristics of the dauntless boy. Self-denial and sacrifice had, in connection with his pluck and energy, helped to make him the peerless young plainsman that he was.

As he rode on, the monotony of the midnight was suddenly broken by the sight of an object that came floating up from the south like the shadow of a passing cloud. But, it was no shadow for, even though no sound could be heard, Desert Dan discovered that the object was a horseman.

Quickly the youth's hand dropped to his pistol-butt. Who but a foe could the unknown rider be? Who, else, but one of the outlaws that had pursued him from the canyon?

Black Robber raised his head and looked at the stranger, stopped stock-still and uttered a weary neigh. Then he started forward at a half-trot, and went whinnying straight toward the approaching horse as though he had recognized

In him an acquaintance whose sympathy his broken spirit sought in the hour of his subjection!

Desert Dan made no effort to stop him, and in a few moments the two horses stood nose to nose, the weary black whimpering in a manner expressive of joy in having met one of his kind, even though a stranger. But of this the young Saddle Prince took little notice, for he sat his horse like one bewildered, gazing into the face of the strange night-rider—a face as seen in the yellow moonbeams that was radiant in its transcendent beauty!

It was the face of a young girl!

For awhile Desert Dan seemed to doubt his own sense of sight, and the beautiful stranger seemed equally surprised and astounded.

And if ever the man in the moon had occasion to smile it was then.

The fair, strange girl could not have been over sixteen. She was clad in black. Her head was bare and a wealth of dark hair hung in two long braids at her back. Dan caught the flash of a jewel on her breast and the glitter of a ring on a finger of her ungloved hand. She was mounted upon a horse that showed signs of hard riding.

For fully a minute the two gazed in speechless surprise into each other's face. Desert Dan was the first to speak.

"Great ginkrickles!" he exclaimed.

"I should say so," was the prompt and laconic reply of the maiden.

"Who on earth be you, girl?" the boy asked; "and where did you come from? and ain't you lost?"

"I come from home and am not lost, as you must be, surely," was the answer he received; "my name is Zulita."

"Zulita," repeated Dan, pleased with the name and its owner's soft, sweet voice; "Zulita, where do you live?"

"At home," she responded, with a little, girlish laugh; "but, where are you going?"

"Wherever this horse takes me," he responded; "this is the famous black wild-horse known as Black Robber, and I—"

"What! you riding Black Robber without bridle and saddle?" the girl interrupted, as she gazed first at Dan and then the horse he rode.

"That's jist what I'm doin', Miss Zulita," the boy proudly answered. "I caught him in a trap to-day and boarded his back. He couldn't get me off and so he ran away with me into this desert almost over from the Rio Hondo."

"You must be as great a rider as Desert Dan, the Saddle Prince, of whom I have heard," said Zulita.

"I'm that very rooster himself, Miss Zulita," Dan informed her, proud of the compliment just received.

The girl uttered a little cry of surprise.

"And, where are you going?" she again asked.

"With this horse. I have no means of guiding him and so I go where he goes."

"Accept this," she said, taking a lariat from her saddle and tossing it to Dan.

"Thank you!" the boy exclaimed, and taking the rope, he tied one end around the stallion's neck, and then threw a slip-noose around his nose. But, Black Robber did not propose to meekly submit to this additional restraint, and struck viciously with his hoof at the encircling cord on his nose, and then started away at a trot, shaking his head and snorting angrily.

Desert Dan, with some effort, succeeded in stopping the horse and turning him around, facing, as he supposed, Zulita; but, to his surprise and deep regret, the girl had disappeared—vanished in a manner so silent and quickly, that he would have doubted his having seen more than an apparition, had it not been for the lariat he held in his hands.

He gazed upon all sides, but nothing except bristling cacti and the crouching, assassin-like sage-bushes could be seen.

In hopes his horse might follow that of the girl's, the boy removed the lariat from the animal's nose and lashed him forward at a weary gallop. But, Black Robber was completely fagged out, and he soon came down to a walk, and Dan's hopes of finding that desert fairy faded from his breast.

The youth had something in particular to think of now. That fair, girlish face had awakened in his breast an emotion beside which all others were as nothing. He had not a single doubt that some mystery surrounded her presence there in that desert and at that hour. He could not think she was the daughter of an outlaw, and yet her actions were sufficiently strange to have created doubts in the mind of any one not blinded by admiration of her bewitching beauty.

Riding on, the boy's ears were finally greeted by the barking of a coyote some distance before him. As he rode on others joined in, and soon it appeared that a dozen or two wolfish scavengers had massed in front of him and were holding a nocturnal concert, or preparing for a feast.

Suddenly a sound, like that of a human voice, came to Dan's ears, mingled with the demoniac yelping of the coyotes.

"Heavens! what if Zulita has been thrown from her horse and is at the mercy of those ravenous beasts?"

As Dan asked himself this question a chill ran through his form, and he urged his horse into a trot.

Plainer and plainer grew the frightful snarling and wrangling of the coyotes, and finally above the din, a human voice, true enough, wailed out upon the night—a voice of some one in distress and agony!

Leaping to the ground, Desert Dan tied the free end of the lariat around the base of a big sage-bush, and Black Robber, for the first, found himself a captive in every sense of the word, for he was firmly held in his tracks by the rope.

Leaving the animal, the boy drew his revolver and ran on toward the coyotes which he could now see, not far away, circling and snarling around something on the ground.

As he approached, the beasts manifested a disposition to give him battle; but a shot from his revolver sent them scampering off, and as they retreated, two round, dark objects became visible lying upon the white sand a rod or two before him.

As the boy advanced to within a few feet of the objects, he suddenly stopped short and started back, a cry escaping his lips.

Those dark, round objects lying there before him on the sands were human heads!

They were upright. The moonbeams falling upon their white faces gave them a ghastly aspect, and when Desert Dan saw the eyes of one of them move, and heard a sound issue from the pale lips, he recoiled with a horrifying shudder, and turned from sight of the trunkless, yet apparently living horrors!

CHAPTER V.

THE BOY TOURISTS IN TROUBLE.

"Boys, in yander chaparral thicket o' scrub cedars, whose tops you can jist see 'bove the plain, is Spring Basin, but, by the great Rosycrusians! I'm afraid thar's some one thar ahead o' us, and it may be a gang o' Mescaleros, or a band o' Desert Pirates!"

The speaker was Old Tom Rattler, the brave and eccentric hunter, with whom we have so often met. He was dressed in his suit of fringed buckskin, armed with rifle, revolvers and knife, and to all appearances possessed of as much life and vigor as when we first encountered him a quarter of a century ago.

Those to whom his remarks were addressed were Ben Mead and Frank Warfield, young fellows of about twenty years, whose garb and general appearance told they were strangers in a strange land. They were bright, intelligent-looking young men. They were well armed, as was the universal custom of that wild region.

All three wore sun-helmets and vails, and were mounted upon ponies. Two pack-animals followed, with supplies and camp equipage.

That morning the three had left Bonito, a mining-camp in the Sacramento Mountains, and started on a trip across the desert lying to the northeast, expecting to strike the Rio Hondo some forty miles from its confluence with the Pecos.

Old Tom had made the trip once, and the young pleasure-seekers, as Mead and Warfield represented themselves to be, had engaged him, in preference to one Jacarilla Jim, who had been recommended to them by a friend, to conduct them to the Hondo. Their way lay over a burning desert, without trail or landmark, and with water obtainable at but one or two points on all the long and shadeless way.

In truth, it was a dangerous journey at the time of which we write, not only on account of the excessive heat, and the lack of water, but of the Mescalero Apaches and white outlaws who, like vultures, were in constant search of prey. Old Tom Rattler, as we know, was an Indian-fighter, and disposed to take great chances for the very love of adventure, and young Mead and Warfield being adventuresome spirits, they had started on the journey without misgivings or fear.

Fifty or sixty miles north of the mountains, at what was known as Spring Basin, was to be

their first camping-ground, and it would require a forced march to reach the place.

Spring Basin was an oasis in that desert where, as the name implies, was a spring of water. It was a basin or sink of considerable area, so far below the level of the plain, that the tops of the cedars that grew therein were just visible above the surrounding waste.

Rattler had stopped there on his way south. It was a good camping-ground, for, in addition to water, there was grazing in the valley for their animals.

They were within two miles of the Basin when Old Tom, looking northward through Mead's field-glass, uttered the words mentioned.

"Why, Tom," replied young Warfield, "do you see Indian signs?"

"I see an Indian on the rim o' the Basin," the old hunter answered; "he's seated on his pony and I'll bet a polar region land title he's a sentinel, and that thar's a hull band o' Mescaleros 'Pachas in the Basin for the night."

"Well, if that be true," said Mead, "it's going to place us in a bad position if the Indians are hostiles."

"You can rest sure on a 'Pacha bein' a hostile," Tom responded; "and all we can do is to keep clear o' their clutches. As it's only a short time till night, we'll hold off until dark and then I'll make a reconnoiter o' the Basin. Meantime we'd better move slowly on as though we meant to pass to the right o' the spring without haltin', and just as though we weren't aware o' their presence; then, soon as darkness covers the desert, we'll double back this way so's to throw 'em off our track if they be in force, and should take a notion to our skulps."

"We leave all to you, Tom," said Warfield.

The three moved slowly forward, bearing gradually away so as to leave the Basin a mile to the left.

The sun finally went down and darkness in due time, followed; then the three doubled back and passed around to the west of the Basin, and at a point a mile or so distant from the spring they halted, and dismounted in the open desert.

"Now, boys," said Old Tom, "I'll slip over to the Basin and see what is really there. Keep your position right here and I'll be back in less than an hour—soon as I gain the information as I'm hankerin' fer."

So saying, the old hunter-guide departed, afoot.

Ben and Frank tied the horses to sage-bushes and began pacing to and fro, for their long ride had numbed their limbs and stiffened their joints.

The moon had not yet risen, but there was bright star-light and the tall cacti and sage-bushes scattered here and there were plainly visible for some rods around.

"This is something we had not calculated upon, Ben," Frank Warfield remarked, as they walked the treeless expanse; "and if we don't get to those springs in the Basin our animals will perish for want of water."

"In that case," replied Ben, "we'd have a fine old time getting out of this desert afoot. But, then, we mustn't borrow trouble. Let us trust to Old Tom and the Lord."

"But, say, Frank, it struck me to-day as being very singular, at least, that our friend, Captain Rufus Clarke should send for us to meet him at the Sacramento Mountain mining-camp, then leave at the very time we were expected to arrive, and rush over to the Rio Hondo."

"Well, didn't he give his reasons for departing so suddenly? and didn't he make arrangements with that ranchero at the Sacramento camp to guide us to Aztec Ranch on the Hondo?"

"That is all true enough, Frank," Ben admitted, "but I can't help thinking Rufus could have waited another day or two, at least. Moreover, the very countenance of that ranchero he'd engaged to pilot us across this desert made me tired. He may be all right, and I presume is, but Jacarilla Jim had the look of a villain to me."

"And so had he to me, Ben; but, what of it?" responded Frank; "we refused to accept his service and took Tom Rattler, and so here we are, and there comes the old moon."

An hour had passed since Rattler had left, and as the moon lifted slowly up into the azure sky, the young tourists frequently glanced off toward Spring Basin, as if growing anxious for the return of their friend and guide.

Suddenly Ben Mead stopped short, and, glancing quickly around him at the low, squatty sage-bushes, observed:

"Frank, it looks to me as though the rising moon has shoved those sage-bushes up closer to us."

Frank Warfield laughed softly, saying: "Ben, you must be getting nervous."

But he had scarcely spoken when no less than a dozen of the nearest bushes between them and the moon were seen to topple to one side, and the next instant a dusky form leaped from the ground from behind each bush, and, with a horrible, fiendish yell, rushed upon the young men, several of them firing shots over the tourists' heads.

Ben and Frank started back, drawing their weapons, for they realized in an instant that they had been attacked by a band of Desert Pirates!

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE "STOCKS."

BEN MEAD and Frank Warfield made a prompt attempt to defend themselves, but the cunning foe were so close upon them, and so quick in their movements, that before they could fire a shot they were seized from each side and behind and hurled violently to the earth.

Then they were quickly disarmed and robbed of everything of value upon their persons, and, in the mean time, their horses and outfit were taken in charge by the robbers of the desert.

Finally, the prisoners were permitted to rise to their feet, and then they saw that their captors were about half white men and Mexicans, and half Mescalero Indians, all of them as ferocious and murderous-looking a gang of cut-throats as were ever banded together.

In the voice of one of the white outlaws, who appeared to be the leader of the gang, was something vaguely familiar to the prisoners. The fellow wore a broad, slouch-brimmed hat that concealed the upper portion of his face, but they were not long in identifying him as the very man whom their friend, Captain Clarke, had left at the mining-camp to guide them across to the Rio Hondo—Jacarilla Jim, the scout!

There was also another white man in the crowd, disguised as an Indian and wearing a superfluity of savage toggery, who appeared to be a person of some authority among the pirates. He was a tall, angular fellow, with a villainous countenance, and whose venomous remarks evidenced a heart of savage cruelty. He was addressed as "Jaguar Head" by his companions.

The pirates conversed with each other in a jargon of Spanish, Indian and English, little of which the captives understood.

Jacarilla Jim was addressed as Captain Sangre—meaning Captain Blood, and there was nothing in his presence there at that time, and upon that occasion, to bid them hope. In fact, it proved they were right in suspecting him, at first sight, of being a villain, notwithstanding he had been recommended to them by their old friend, Rufus Clarke, whom they had expected to join at Camp Benito. That their capture by the Desert Pirates was premeditated there was no doubt, but the young men did not believe that the sole cause of it was their rejection of Jim as guide.

There was a mystery connected with their capture, the sudden departure of Captain Clarke from the Sacramento camp, and the eagerness of the man, who proved to be the leader of the Desert Pirates, to conduct them across to the Rio Hondo. How far, and in what way, Captain Clarke was connected with it they, of course, could not imagine.

The fate of Old Tom Rattler was another matter that concerned the captives, and grave fears of his capture or death filled their minds.

Altogether the situation for the young men was critical, and they knew not what the outcome would be. The Apaches stood around them with tomahawks in hand, apparently waiting the word from Captain Sangre or Jaguar Head to brain them.

Finally the outlaw chief approached Ben and asked:

"Where is your guide, young man?—the old hunter?"

"I don't know," was the prompt answer of young Mead, in a firm voice.

"He was with you at sunset; what became of him?" the outlaw demanded.

These questions convinced the captives that Old Rattler's whereabouts were unknown to the outlaws, and it gave them a slight degree of hope. To the villain's queries Ben replied in an evasive manner, which caused the outlaw to become angered, and turning to a Mexican at his side, he said:

"Jackal, take the tourists' spade and dig a pair of 'stocks' and we'll plant them till mornin' and maybe they'll talk, then."

Among the captives' camping outfit was a

spade, an implement always carried by men crossing the deserts for use in cleaning sand-drifted springs. This tool "Jackal" procured and set to work digging a hole in the sand and earth. He was relieved in his work at intervals by others, and in a short time two holes "chin deep" were ready for their victims.

Then the feet of the captives were tied together and their hands secured at their backs. This done, they were stood erect in the recently-dug holes and the sand filled in around them, and when the villains' work was thus completed, Ben and Frank were buried alive to the neck, unable, of course, to move a muscle.

"In the mornin'," said Captain Sangre, alias Jacarilla Jim, "we will see you again if the coyotes don't eat yer heads off."

And thus the outlaws left them "stocked," and wended their way back toward Spring Basin, fully satisfied their victims would never live to see the dawn of another day. The "stocks" was a favorite Apache mode of torture.

The young tourists were within ten feet of each other, and could look into one another's face, and as the Desert Pirates disappeared from sight Ben exclaimed, in despondency of spirit:

"Frank, this is a hard old deal, and the game's up with us unless Rattler gets around before the wolves do, and I don't think we need expect him. I believe he is in the power of those devils or dead, else they would never have left us here alive in this plight, knowing he would return and release us."

"I do not understand," replied Frank, "why the fiends leave us in this horrible plight—why they did not kill us outright and so end our misery, unless Old Tom is not in their power, and they hope to trap him when he comes to our release."

Thus the two conversed over their situation, fully believing the foe were lying in wait hard by.

Less than half an hour had passed when the bark of a coyote was heard close by, and in less than five minutes it was answered from a dozen different directions.

Presently a gaunt, shaggy form came shying up to within a few feet of the helpless men, sniffed the air, and, thrusting its nose upward, uttered a long-drawn and dismal cry that sent a shudder to the very hearts of the imprisoned men. From every quarter came an answering cry, and in a few minutes more a dozen coyotes were circling about the doomed men, growing bolder and bolder each moment, approaching closer and closer, until the prisoners could almost feel their hot breath upon their faces.

The helpless men shouted at the hungry brutes, in hopes of frightening them away, but in vain. That a horrible death awaited them they did not doubt. Tom Rattler came not.

But hark! A pistol rings out! The wolves fall back with an angry snarl, and reluctantly retreat before an advancing figure.

A cry of joy rises to the lips of Ben Mead and Frank Warfield.

"Tom Rattler is coming!" is the thought that flashes through their brain, but the next instant hope fades from their breasts. They see the approaching form outlined against the sky. It is not Tom Rattler, but a stranger, who, hatless and sly, comes creeping like an assassin toward them, a revolver in each hand glittering in the moonlight.

Up to within twenty feet of them came the unknown; then he stopped, started back and turned as if to flee.

The unknown was Desert Dan, the Boy Saddle Prince.

CHAPTER VII.

DESERT DAN TO THE RESCUE.

"HELP, stranger, be you friend or foe!" was the earnest appeal of Ben Mead, as he saw the unknown turn away.

Again Desert Dan, for the hatless stranger was the captor of the desert stallion, paused, and once more turned toward the ghastly objects on the sand to assure himself from whence those appealing words had come, and it was at that instant that the truth of the situation flashed through his brain.

"Great, holy Jingrickes!" burst from the lips of the young horse-tamer; "what are you? and what for a fix are you in?"

"We are two very unfortunate fellows," replied Ben; "and were planted here by a gang of red and white cut-throats. I beg you'll help us out of this predicament before the villains return."

"I'll do the best I can for you, strangers," responded Desert Dan. "Your 'planters' left

their spade and some other tools behind, so I'll sail in and grub you out."

True enough, the outlaws had left the tourists' spade behind, and Dan proceeded to dig the two men out. The ground was soft and yielding, and in a few minutes Ben and Frank once more stood free, gazing into the strikingly handsome face of their young rescuer, and thanking the fate that had sent him adrift on the plain that night.

It required but a few moments for the three to explain who they were, and the combination of circumstances that had brought them together, when Desert Dan said:

"Then I'm afraid your old friend Rattler's in trouble, else he'd been 'round 'fore this. However that may be, it won't do for us to remain here. We'd better pitch our tents out where we can pull the most of the night over us."

Acting upon the boy's advice, Ben and Frank decided to leave that memorable spot, and so accompanied the youth back to where he had left Black Robber tied.

After receiving in full a history of the noted stallion, and the exciting manner in which he had come into Dan's possession, Ben and Frank assisted the youth to place a noose over the horse's nose and to lead him away—all of which was accomplished with little difficulty.

Not one of the three had any definite idea of where they were really going. They wanted to keep out of the clutches of the outlaws, but they were not sure whether they were going away from danger or into it.

Finally they came to a dry sink in the plain where they thought it possible they might pass the night unobserved. The bottom of this sink was wholly devoid of vegetation, but around the edge above was a thick fringe of sagebrush.

Into this depression they led and secured the black stallion; then they held a consultation. Desert Dan related the story of his meeting with the spirit of the night, the fair Zulita, and Ben and Frank could see that the young Desert Rider was deeply concerned about the girl. He could not think she belonged with the outlaw band in Spring Basin, and yet it was hard for him to believe that she was at home in that great desert. In fact, her presence there was a mystery that he determined to solve as soon as possible.

That which concerned the trio now, more than anything else, was their need of water. That particular plain was new to Dan and he did not know of the existence of water in Spring Basin until informed of it by Ben and Frank. But, so long as the pirates occupied the basin, the water there was not for them.

Ben and Frank could not give up the hope that Old Rattler would return all right, and rather than leave without knowing his fate, they resolved to remain in the vicinity until near morning, at least.

The little party was not in good condition for defense, it is true, for Ben and Frank had been robbed of even their jack-knives, and so far as means of escape were concerned, they had practically none.

After some moments consultation Desert Dan concluded to go back to a point near where he had rescued Ben and Frank and watch for Old Tom. He left one of his revolvers with the boys, cautiously ascended to the top of the sink, and gazed around over the moonlit plain.

While he stood thus, he saw a dark, round object disappear behind a sage-brush not over fifteen feet from him. He at once mistrusted that it was the head of a Mescalero scout lurking upon their trail. He at once drew his revolver and was in the act of firing point-blank through the bush when the thought occurred to him that it might be Tom Rattler, the hunter-guide, to whom he—Dan—was unknown, hence his stealthy movements.

Holding his position, the watchful young horse-tamer scrutinized the sage-brush, and presently saw at least six feet of fantastically-decorated Mescalero Apache rise up before him, his arms folded across his breast, his head elevated with an air of great importance, while, in a tone of imperious dignity, he demanded:

"Surrender, you miserable sand-rat! I am Jaguar Head, the Great! Waugh!"

"Nary s'render, Jag," was the prompt response of the Saddle Prince. "I am Desert Dan, the Little, and if you want any amusement, just climb this way!"

And the young ranchero leveled his revolver upon the breast of Jaguar Head, the Great.

CHAPTER VIII.

JAGUAR HEAD SURRENDERS.

"HOLD on there, sand-rat!" cried Jaguar Head, speaking English fluently; "don't be too

fresh with that iron. To harm a hair of this royal head, or spill a drop of this imperial blood, would be to consign you to everlasting punishment. Have fear o' death in your heart, boy, and put away that tool and bow in humble penitence before the great Jaguar Head, or I'll blight you forever with a single thought."

"Blight away, then," retorted the Boy Prince, "and I'll let this pinker pink, and by jingrickys! I'll bet the blight 'll not all be on one side. Do you say it's a go?—thinker against pinker? blight and bullet? mind or matter? which shall it be, Jaguar?"

"Babblin' coyote!" the chief indignantly exclaimed, "the heat of the moon will melt your softness. Must I call my warriors, who are as the grains of sand on the desert?"

"Don't bother yourself, Jigger Head," advised Dan, "'bout callin' anything or you might invite a hunk of lead from this way. Look here! My warriors, who are not as the sands of the desert, are on hand now."

This latter observation was in allusion to Ben Mead and Frank Warfield, who, having heard the badinage, had hastened to Desert Dan's side.

"Whew!" whistled the chief, as he saw the two young men appear, "what next will the night spew forth to mar the moonlight, and squeak like rats along the promenade where majestic walks Great Jaguar Head?"

"A sage-brush tragedian!" Ben Mead exclaimed in an undertone to Frank.

"Ah! the fellow that was so solicitous about planting us in the desert," added Frank Warfield.

"And an old wind-bag, he is," declared Desert Dan, "a pretended Ingin whom the coyotes wouldn't yelp after. A coyote knows p'izen and wind."

"And stands on his hind legs and yawllips," declared Jaguar Head; "but, I can no longer tarry here. Do you fellers perpose to s'render and go with me quietly? or must I be forced to—"

"We don't purpose to surrender, nor do we purpose you shall call help," replied Dan; "on the contrary, we want you to throw up those blood-stained paws of yours and march down into this sink."

"Well, why in the name of the cryin' banshees, boy, didn't ye say so before?" was the astonishing response of the outlaw and renegade, as he raised both hands aloft and advanced toward the boys; "I'm not wholly mean—like to humor children that they may learn my power. Here I am now—s'rendered. What ye going to do with me? What use have ye got for a great Ingin chief like Jaguar Head?—a great livin' upas which but to touch is death! Woof!"

To tell the truth, Desert Dan and his friends were never more astonished than they were at that moment by the man's sudden change of base. They expected, and were fully prepared for, a fight, and the renegade's apparent willingness to surrender upon demand was incomprehensible, and if the chief had been disposed to take advantage of the situation, he could have made good his escape before the boys had fully recovered from their surprise. Desert Dan, however, was quick to grasp the situation, and stepping back a pace, he said:

"Don't try any tricks, Jaguar Head!"

"I'm your prisoner; take me and take care of me," was the renegade's response.

As he came closer to them, the trio saw that he was a walking arsenal, his waist being girded about by five or six belts loaded down with revolvers and knives, while at his back hung two Winchester carbines that Ben and Frank recognized as their own property, as they also did some of the belts and revolvers.

"Advance, boys!" ordered Dan, "and take charge o' them weapons, and if the old tarantula attempts to touch you, I'll red-spot him right between the eyes."

Ben and Frank proceeded to strip the Mescalero of his array of guns, pistols and other paraphernalia of war. During the entire proceedings the chief never uttered a single protest, nor scarcely moved a muscle. This quiet submission made Desert Dan all the more suspicious of the villain's real intentions, and a closer watch than ever was kept on his movements.

Once again in possession of their own trusty weapons, Ben and Frank felt more at ease, and as he buckled on his belt again, the former observed:

"The return of our weapons to us seems like an act of Providence, and now if Old Tom only would turn up, we could be reasonably happy."

"Old Tom who?" asked the disarmed Jaguar Head, with provoking impertinence.

"You'll know, if ever Old Tom Rattler gets one good whack at you," was young Mead's answer.

"Cryin' banshees!" exclaimed the renegade chief; "do you mean to tell me Old Rattler's abroad, loose, at large on this desert? Old Tom Rattler, the hunter?—a little, hump-backed, demon-eyed, weazen-faced rip-saw?—a fightin', killin' besom o' deestruction?"

"Oh! you seem to know Uncle Tom Rattler?" observed Frank Warfield, with a smile.

"Yes, I do know him!" answered the renegade, "and I want you to know that this desert isn't big enough to hold Tom Rattler and Jaguar Head the Great! If he should come round while I sojourn with you, I want two o' you, at least, to hold me. The sight of that ancient old mountain snorter and frontier bummer gives me the jamboraniacs. You'd better search me closer, for I might have some pocket-weapons lurkin' in my church vestments."

The suggestion was at once acted upon and most of Ben and Frank's personal effects were found upon his person. And, much to their surprise, as well as to their delight, an old army canteen filled with water was found in the ample bosom of his gaudy calico shirt.

Having completed the search the boys conducted the chief down into the sink where, at sight of the black stallion, the fellow went into raptures, and cautiously approaching the animal he addressed it kindly and began passing his hand gently over its neck and body.

Meanwhile Desert Dan kept a sharp watch on the fellow's movements, his revolver in hand, satisfied that the old villain meant to play them some treachery whenever he could catch them off their guard.

While Dan thus guarded their prisoner Ben returned to the watch on the plain above.

Frank walked back and forth between his friends, and Old Jaguar Head threw himself in a reclining position on the sandy bed of the sink.

Half an hour of comparative silence had thus followed when the renegade looked up at Frank, who had just come down from where Ben stood guard, and coolly inquired:

"Nothin' o' Old Tom Rattler yet?"

"Is it any of your business?" was Frank's tart response.

"No, not at all; but I wanted to be agreeable," was the indifferent old scoundrel's rejoinder.

"Ten to one," spoke up Desert Dan, "you know where Rattler is. Just like as any way you and your minions have murdered him."

"If Rattler's been killed by my braves it's been since I stole softly away from camp to dig you fellers out o' the sand," declared the chief.

"You don't mean to say you came back to rescue us after ordering us buried alive, do you?" demanded Frank.

"That's just what I do mean to say," responded the chief, "and when I found you'd got out o' the 'stocks' I tracked you here through the moonlight. You may not believe me, but this is all true as Gospel. I got to thinkin' 'bout your innocent, boyish faces, and what noble braves you'd make, and so I went to rescue you, and carry you to my village, and adopt you as my sons, and marry you to dusky-eyed Mescalero maidens. But, alas! alas! Here am I fallen! Like a forest monarch—a giant, sturdy oak, here lies prostrate Jaguar Head, the Great! You'll henceforth be distinguished boys because o' my being your prisoner. But Rattler! Tom Rattler! Old Tom Rattler! How that name harrows up my soul! How it causes the blood to leap, and hiss, and sputter in my veins! How my spirit chafes within me to rush madly forth into the night and destroy Tom Rattler."

"What has he ever done to incur your royal wrath?" questioned Frank.

"What has he done?" repeated the chief fiercely. "Well, I was once an upright and happy man. I wedded me a golden-haired wife, and for two years lived in perpetual sunshine like an ambrosial god. But, alas! one day there came my way a gay deceiver. He stole away my wife's affection, and, not satisfied with that larceny, he finally stole the woman herself and fled away to parts unknown. My home was broken—busted. I became an awful savage, thirsting for vengeance—human gore, and—"

"See here!" interrupted Frank, "what's all this to do with Old Tom Rattler?"

"It war Tom Rattler that run away with my wife, that's what!"

"Multitudinous liar!" came a voice from the top of the sink, that was recognized as that of Old Tom Rattler. "Rise, stand and be shot to

death! You've told your last falsehood—deceived and defrauded your last victim!"

Quickly leaping to his feet, Jaguar Head folded his arms across his breast, turned toward the speaker on the edge of the sink, exclaiming:

"By the great horn o' Joshua! It's Old Tom Rattler, the Red River Epidemic, as true as my maiden name is Ka-ristopher Ko-lumbus Bandy! Old Tom, fire! shoot! Do your worst, you measly image ov a gorilla!"

CHAPTER IX.

DAVID AND JONATHAN MEET.

WITH a cry of joy Old Tom Rattler leaped into the pit and grasped the extended hand of Jaguar Head, whose voice he had recognized as that of his old-time pard, the redoubtable Old Kit Bandy, the Mountain Detective!

"Old Kit Bandy or I'm a rip-roarin' liar!" cried Old Rattler.

The two old men came together with a demonstration of joy indicative of the Jonathan and David friendship that existed between them. It had been but a few months since they had parted in Arizona after their big rustle in the Black Mountains, which had culminated in the death of Black Vulcan, the leader of the Desert Pirates in that part of the Southwest.

Desert Dan and his companions were again completely astounded. All of them had heard of Old Kit Bandy, and since they had met Rattler, Ben and Frank had been listening to stories, by the hunter-guide, of the Old Mountain Detective, every day and night.

After Tom and his old friend had indulged in hearty greeting, Old Tom said to Ben and Frank:

"Come this way, Ben Mead and Frank Warfield, and let me introduce you to Kit Bandy, the Old Mountain Detective and fraud, and double-gear, triple-plated, unholy, oil-finished liar."

Ben and Frank came up, and with their faces beaming with pleasure, shook hands with Kit Bandy, young Mead saying:

"We begin to see through the millstone, Kit Bandy—why the great Jaguar Head surrendered so quietly, and why our weapons were found on your person, notwithstanding the bad company we found you in."

"I'm always to be found wherever I can make myself useful, boy," Kit Bandy responded. "It makes no difference to me what society I'm in, so's it isn't Tom Rattler's. I can find hay-dogins o' good work to do, but 'ith him 'round I feel my inferiority so sensibly that I can't perform. Ole Tom, God bless his ugly, measly old picters, is a hull nest o' gruzzlies in a thorn jungle."

"Then it was all a canard about Tom running away with your wife?" inquired Frank.

"Come to think, it wasn't Tom Rattler, but another feller," laughingly replied the old detective.

"Pardon me, Rattler," suddenly spoke Ben Mead; "I forgot to introduce you to our new friend and rescuer, Desert Dan, the Boy Saddle Prince of the Southern Ranges."

"Great Rosycrusians!" exclaimed Old Tom, "who next's goin' to turn up in this rondimed desert? Wal, Desert Dan! I'm heroically glad to meet you. I hearn o' you all they way from Trinidad to El Paso and back, and it's a wonder to me that a boy o' your mettle didn't salt this ole Basbi Bazouk Kit Bandy, when he fust perpetrated that Ingin business onto ye."

"By Gingricky! I come within an ace of warpin' it into him!" declared Dan.

"But, Tom, we'd about given you up as a goner," said young Mead.

"I staid longer'n I expected," replied Tom, "but I war determined to explore Spring Basin, as well as reconnoiter the enemy's camp. But now I want to know what happened you folks after I left. I found the place where I left you, and see'd you'd had trouble. I tracked you here through the sand and moonlight; but, where's our horses?"

"The followers of Jaguar Head and our rejected guide, Jacarilla Jim, took them," answered Mead, and he then gave a detailed account of all that had transpired since the hunter's departure.

"Great Rosycrusians!" exclaimed Tom; "Kit Bandy, hav'n't you 'bout overdone the Jaguar Head business? Didn't you bite off more'n you could chew? S'pose the outlaws and Ingins'd killed the boys in spite of you?"

"I war master o' ceremonies, and I had the boys planted on purpose," answered Kit, "so's I'd have an opportunity to steal back and release 'em. I got back, but Desert Dan'd been there fust. I dasn't show my hand jist then, for Captain Blood war a little suspicious and

might git onto my racket. I wasn't ready yit to throw up on my Jaguar Head commission. I'm 'starring' New Mexico on an open engagement, and when I got my eyes on that black stud there, I thought I'd hit something immense, but I war mistaken."

"Why something immense?" queried Desert Dan.

"I recognized the boss, or thought I did, as Black Robber, the famous black wild boss that has been defying the wild-hoss-catchers for years. I war told that Black Robber carried, it war supposed, in his shoulder, a secret that would reveal a black and damnable crime, as well as the whereabouts of a secret gold mine of great value. It war to run down Black Robber that Jaguar Head and his warriors—waugh!—are here on their way toward the Rio Hondo, and the first day out we fell in with Blood and his outlaws, and as the Mescaleros and the Desert Pirates are hail fellows well met, we had to sojourn together, inasmuch as Spring Basin was to be the stopping-place of both parties. I war terribly afraid Blood'd recognize me, and if he had he'd not been slow to avenge the death of Captain Vulcan, the old leader of the Desert Pirates, whom we everlastingly busted up in Arizona. In fact, I found out that Blood was here to intercept and destroy Tom Rattler and a pair o' youngsters named Mead and Warfield."

"Yes," exclaimed Ben Mead, "he really is Jacarilla Jim, whom a friend sent to Camp Bonito to conduct us to the Rio Hondo."

"It war a bad break on the part o' yer friend, Cap Clarke, to have anything to do with Jacarilla Jim. I could 'a' give him points on Jim—I could!"

"Do you know Captain Clarke, Mr. Bandy?" eagerly questioned Ben Mead.

"Should say I did, boy, when he's the man that put me on the track o' your father's murderers!"

CHAPTER X.

JAGUAR HEAD IS WANTED.

NOT only was Ben Mead, but his companions, also, astounded by Kit Bandy's unlooked-for revelation.

"Kit," Ben exclaimed, "how did you know my father was murdered?"

"Cap Clarke, your father's friend, told me all about it, and that he had sent for you to come down to the Territory at once to assist in bringin' the murderers to justice. I didn't know which way you war to come in, as Cap didn't tell me."

"He told me to come to Camp Bonito by way of El Paso," answered Ben, "and said he would meet me there, but when I reached camp we were met by Jacarilla Jim with a letter from Captain Clarke, saying he was compelled to leave at once for the Rio Hondo valley and informing me that Jacarilla Jim, a famous guide and ranger, would conduct me to the Hondo ranch. But we took such a dislike to Jim that we could not trust ourselves in his care, and so dismissed him and employed Tom Rattler, and thereby incurred Jim's enmity."

"Not that alone, boy," responded Old Kit; "I think he's here on the way to try and catch Black Robber, as much as to get even with you. I think he's workin' one string o' the murder-and-mize mystery for all there is in it."

"But Black Robber is in my possession," said Desert Dan, "at the present time, at least. And if I ever get him to Don de Vaca's ranch, I'll get a thousand dollars. But, I'd like to know what the stallion has to do with the secret of Ben Mead's father's murder and the secret mine."

"And so would I," added Ben, "for Captain Clarke simply wrote that he had a clew to my father's and step-mother's death. He gave me no particulars, but said he would tell me all when he met me about the dying confession of one Carlita Bond."

"I'll tell you, boys, how Clarke got onto the clew," said Old Kit.

And then he narrated in detail the story of the fugitive woman, Carlita Bond, as given in the opening chapter of this story.

The story filled the breasts of the boys with sadness as well as surprise.

Ben Mead brushed the tears from his eyes when Kit had finished his recital, murmuring:

"Poor father! poor little Dolly!"

Ben's father had left him in the care of an uncle when he was but eight years of age, and had gone West. Being a widower, he drifted into Mexico and there married his second wife—a Spanish woman.

Ben had never seen her nor his half-sister, Dolly, whom her father had lashed upon the black colt and sent adrift on the plain. This

had been twelve years ago. The colt was two years old then, and would now be fourteen years of age. The oldest horse-hunters claimed the black horse had appeared at the head of a large herd about one year after the Black Arroyo Massacre.

"Captain Clarke had the greatest faith," Old Kit went on to explain, "in Carlita Bond's story, and had hopes that the colt might be the Black Robber now running wild on the plain. Of this I'd little hopes on account of the age of the horse; but I determined to try to get hold of the beast, if I had to shoot him. I have already examined the critter, and find no deposit in his shoulder; in fact, he is not over six years of age, and so all hopes of obtaining the secret of which Carlita told the captain dies with the capture of Black Robber."

"But, Kitsie," said Old Tom, "all you've told us doesn't explain your bein' a Mescalero—Jaguar Head, the Chief—the Great! the Horrible! Waugh!"

"Thomas, you shouldn't poke your proboscis too far into other people's private affairs," was Kit's rejoinder, "or you might get it bloodied. The fact is, I helped two Mescaleros to recapture 'bout forty hosses some Mexicans had stolen from the Paches and war runnin' over into Ole Mexico. There was one splendid black stud in the herd, and I thought it might be the boss I wanted 'stead o' Black Robber, so I walked in and put the lead to every darned Mexican thief and helped the Mescaleros run their hosses back home, whar I was received with shoutin' honors and upon my own request 'dopted into the tribe, and at once distinguished myself in a boss-stealin' excursion over into Mexico."

"I war then named Jaguar Head and made a chief for war purposes, and I war glad when I got on my disguise o' paint and feathers through fear some Desert Pirate'd recognize me. My first object in goin' into the vicinity o' the Ingin camp was to see if thar were any white gal-captive there that'd answer for 'Dolly,' but I found none, nor had there been any there."

"Bet you what, Carlita Bond's story war all a hoax," said Tom, "created especially for your benefit. You're a victim, Kitsie, and you'd better go 'long with us and I'll put you in a retreat for antiquities and safe keepin'. You're too old to be starrin' 'round in New Mexico."

"Too old? That's good!" exclaimed Kit, sarcastically, "bein'ts Tom Rattler is a young colt—a frisky, prancin', yearlin' steer! Oh! give me repose! Tom, you're so wearisome; but 'for a' that and a' that,' I'm always glad to see your ugly old—"

"Friends," suddenly called out Ben Mead, from the top of the sink, "I believe there is a band of horsemen coming this way from the south."

"Look sharp, lads! look sharp!" cautioned Old Kit. "If it's Jacarilla's cut-throats—not my warriors, understand—they may give you haydoggins of trouble."

Followed by Old Tom and Frank Warfield, Desert Dan bounded up out of the sink to where Ben stood, Old Kit remaining in the sink, not wishing to be seen there, a willing prisoner.

True enough, up from the south came a score of horsemen that all were satisfied were outlaws, both red-skins and white.

"By the great Rosycrusians!" Old Tom ejaculated, "it begins to look as though we war goin' to have some lively times, boys."

"If they are the followers of Jaguar Head," said young Warfield, pointing to Old Kit, "I should suppose he could keep the bloodthirsty devils from pouncing onto us again."

"I believe it's the gang that chased me up the canyon to-day," declared Desert Dan, "and if so—Ah! they have halted! We're discovered!"

He had scarcely spoken when the flash of a gun was seen, and a bullet whistled overhead as the report of the weapon rung out on the night.

"Get into the blow-out, boys," ordered Desert Dan, "and I'll watch the varlets' movements."

Ben and Frank joined Kit Bandy in the sink, while Old Tom remained with the Saddle Prince to watch the foe.

In a few minutes a single person was seen to ride out from the main body of horsemen toward the "stranded" whites.

Tom and Dan waited until he was about fifty paces from them, when Old Rattler stepped out into plain view and demanded:

"Who comes thar?"

The horseman drew rein and at once responded:

"I am Swift-Wing, the Apache scout."

"You speak mighty good English for an Apache," responded Desert Dan; "sure you're not a fraud?"

"I am a white Ingin," came the answer, "and you know what that means."

"Well, what do you want, Swift-Wing?" Dan questioned.

"You have Jaguar Head a captive in your midst," came the response.

"Well, what of it?" Dan retorted.

"And you have Black Robber, the wild stallion, in that sink."

"And what of that?" from Desert Dan, again.

"We demand that you release our chief, and that you send Black Robber with him, without delay."

"You're too modest," shouted Old Rattler; "don't ye want our kulp, too?"

"We'll take them if you refuse our demands for the release of our chief, and the possession of the horse," Swift-Wing returned.

"As fur as yer blcwsy ole chief's concerned, we don't care the prick o' a cactus what becomes of him," Old Rattler declared; "but as fur the boss, you'll have to fight for him—you bet!"

"Fight it is, then," responded Swift-Wing, and turning his horse he galloped back to his waiting friends.

CHAPTER XI.

A MIDNIGHT CONFLICT.

"Boys," exclaimed Old Rattler, "by the Rosycrusians! we're in for it now, and let every boy prepare for a lively scrap."

"Tom," said Old Kit Bandy, approaching the veteran hunter, "I think I'd better go out to them varmints, and, as Jaguar Head, convince them they'd better let you alone—tell 'em there's an epidemic lurkin' in this sand-pit."

"But our surrendarin' their chief, Kitsie, will be an admission of our weakness and fears, or so construed," Rattler contended.

"Thomas, trust me to arrange that," reassured Bandy; "if the varmints hav'n't got onto my game, I'll scare 'em outen attackin' you here. It's their beloved chief they want, but what bothers me is as to how they know Black Robber is in this scoop-out. They knew nothin' o' it when I left camp, and 'less they war joined by the gang that chased Desert Dan to-day, and that gang has kept a dead set on the boy up to this time, I can't imagine how they obtained the information they seem to have. But, boys, I'm goin' right over there, and if my followers are there, you shall not be harmed a mite. Jaguar Head has spoken. Waugh!"

Kit bid them good-by, and leaving the sink, walked straight toward the assembled crowd, that was about two hundred yards away, plainly visible in the moonlight.

The little, desert-stranded party watched the old man until he was lost from view among the marauders. They heard shouts and exclamations from the gang as he joined them; but a few moments later they heard low, excited words that created uneasiness in Tom Rattler's breast.

Ten more minutes passed, when a single horseman was again seen to ride out from the assembled party toward the sink. He came to within thirty paces of the quartet and called out:

"Say, over there: have you decided to turn over that black stallion to us? Seein' you've give up Jaguar Head quietly, maybe you'll fork over the horse on the same terms, and save bloodshed?"

"Fetch on your blood if you want it shed!" retorted Desert Dan, putting on a bold front, for both he and Tom had made up their minds that the enemy was playing a big game of bluff.

Without another word the horseman turned and went back to his friends, and soon afterward Rattler and his party discovered that the foe were in dead earnest, for, with a yell such as can only come from an Apache's throat, the most of the band put their horses into a swift gallop and came thundering down upon the old hunter guide and his companions.

"The devils are comin', by the great Rosycrusians!" Rattler exclaimed. "Down into the pit, boys, and be ready to baste them in the prow! It's victory or death! Kit Bandy has failed in his promise to keep them off, but fight fer yer altars an' yer sires, an' bet yer life Old Kit will be around when the soup is b'ilin'."

The four sprung down into their retreat and turned to meet the oncoming foe.

They did not have long to wait. Old Rattler opened the ball by firing at the first head that

appeared above the rim of the basin, and, although the shot was by moonlight, it emptied a saddle, and the riderless pony came plunging over the bank into the sink almost on top of Ben Mead.

The next instant the battle was on in good earnest. Desert Dan's skill as a revolver shot now stood him in good hand, and, although Ben and Frank had never before heard a shot fired in anger, they bore themselves with the coolness of veterans, and poured a steady fire into the foe from their Winchesters.

The outlaw gang was undoubtedly as greatly surprised as the party attacked. They had evidently counted upon striking terror to the hearts of the four men by the boldness of their attack and the odds they would display, and thereby gain a bloodless victory.

But when at least half a dozen of the foremost saddles were emptied in a moment almost, and the horses thus made riderless flew off on a tangent, the ranks became confused, and a panic would have ensued but for the courage and coolness of the outlaw leader, who rallied his men and ordered them to charge down upon the foe in their stronghold.

At once three or four horsemen came plunging forward and leaped their horses down into the sink, forcing the four defenders to retreat to the opposite side.

In a moment more the whole band was crowding into the basin. In hopes of saving his horse from falling into the enemy's hands, Desert Dan stopped to cut the animal's lariat. This delay proved a sad thing for the brave boy, for before he could rejoin his friends he was seized by half a dozen strong hands and borne to the earth.

Forced from the sink, old Tom and his two young friends dashed into a clump of sage-brush, where they turned and blazed away at those who attempted to follow.

Then they ran on, dodging from the cover of one clump to another, firing as they retreated, and with such fatal effect that the pursuit was finally relinquished and the three were permitted to escape for the time being.

The possession of the coveted black stallion and the capture of Desert Dan had cost them dearly, and they had no desire to add more to their dead-list, by pursuing the three fugitives then.

The greatest excitement prevailed in and around that sink for the next ten minutes, and it was all that the outlaw leader could do to restrain his savage followers from braining the defiant Saddle Prince.

Finally the boy was placed in charge of two outlaws, while Captain Sangre and Swift-Wing took possession of Black Robber, who, as the result of the late excitement, began to manifest some of his old wild spirit.

Swift-Wing was a renegade chief of the outlaw Apaches, and a sort of lieutenant of the Desert Pirates. It was he who led the band which had pursued Desert Dan up the canyon that day.

After the boy had escaped on the wild horse, he had followed him on into the desert, and arrived at Spring Basin a few minutes after Kit Bandy—Jaguar Head—had stolen away from camp to aid Ben and Frank.

The two villains seemed as eager to possess the black stallion as Old Kit Bandy or Don de Vaca. They examined him closely, and each of his shoulders they rubbed and pinched until they had the animal half-frantic.

"There's not a blemish on him," Captain Sangre finally declared, in a tone that seemed full of disappointment.

"No; there's never been a knife in his shoulder," added the outlaw's lieutenant, Swift-Wing, "and I'm beginnin' to suspect that Hualpa Jose's been workin' us—that the Carlita Bond story is all gammon for some purpose of that shrewd scamp."

"That may not be the horse," Sangre said; "in fact, it isn't. We have no assurance that the black colt released by Horace Mead ever became a wild horse, and, if it did, it would now be fourteen years old, and this animal is not a day over six or seven years old. We're on the wrong trail, Swifty, as well as some other people. But, the next thing to find out is, what has brought Desert Dan from away up North to this country to catch Black Robber. It may be there is a third or fourth party after the secret to the lost mines of Trinchera."

The two villains walked over to where Desert Dan stood under guard and began to ply him with questions, but the young Saddle Prince stubbornly refused to answer a single question, nor could they coerce him with threats.

Finally preparations for returning to Spring

Basin were made. Desert Dan's hands were securely tied at his back, and then a hideous-looking little Mexican, who had been wounded severely, if not mortally, in the fight, was stood up behind the boy and securely lashed to his back by means of a lariat wound around and around the bodies of each from hip to shoulder. The Mexican, being half a head shorter than Dan, brought his basilisk eyes just above the young ranch-rider's shoulders.

Thus firmly lashed together, Dan and the Mexican were lifted from the ground and placed astride of Black Robber with the injunction to "hug on" or "tumble off" at the risk of breaking their necks.

Black Robber objected to the double burden placed upon him and endeavored to dislodge it; but a half-dozen Desert Pirates had hold of the lariat, and the poor brute was again forced to succumb and be led away with its two riders.

At every step of the horse the wounded Mexican uttered a groan, and, as his throat was half-filled with blood, the sound was anything but pleasant in Desert Dan's ears.

As they moved away, the young Prince's mind reverted to Jaguar Head—Kit Bandy—and he wondered what had become of the great detective and why he had not exerted his boasted influence to stay the Pirates attack upon them.

Moving up to where the outlaws first halted, and where a few persons were still standing, the Boy Prince was almost struck dumb by the sight that met his gaze.

Standing erect upon the ground, with his hands tied before him, his head-dress torn from his head, a dead Apache strapped upon his shoulders, was Kit Bandy, the Mountain Detective!

"Behold!" exclaimed Captain Sangre, with a tragic air, pointing to the old man, and addressing Desert Dan, "how the mighty have fallen! But a few minutes ago he boasted to you in the hearing of Long-Ears, my scout and spy, that he was possessed of royal blood and mighty power! But Jaguar Head, the Great, has fallen! Instead of the great Mescalero, you see Old Kit Bandy, the Cunning, about to begin his death-march to Spring Basin!"

CHAPTER XII.

LASHED TO A CORPSE.

A MOMENTARY halt was made where Kit Bandy stood, shorn of all his power as a chief, and subjected to the humiliation and disgrace of bearing upon his shoulders the corpse of an Apache warrior that had fallen in the conflict. To Desert Dan the situation was not promising. With Old Rattler and his two young friends adrift on the desert, afoot, no assistance could be expected of them.

Naturally the youth's mind reverted to the girl, Zalita.

"Who was she? and where did she reside?" he asked himself over and over again. There was still before him on Black Robber the lariat she had given him—positive proof of her material existence. But, what was the mystery surrounding her?

When the order to march was finally given by Captain Sangre, the return to Spring Basin began; but Black Robber had taken but a few steps when an outlaw with a cactus-thorn pricked the animal in the flank, and with a snort he shot forward, tearing the lariat through the hands of those leading him, and almost unseating Dan and the Mexican tied to him; but, clasping the body of his horse with his limbs, the Saddle Prince held his position, and Black Robber, now fired with new life and strength, dashed away with a sudden burst of furious rage.

He was the wild stallion again!

The Desert Pirates started in pursuit, some yelling like mad and a few firing their revolvers, all of which added to the speed of the maddened horse.

Away like the wind—with all his old-time speed went the stallion, leaving the pursuing outlaws far behind. Not only had he had rest enough to get his second wind, but he seemed to have gone mad.

Desert Dan sat helpless upon the horse's back, the wounded Mexican uttering feeble groans and cries at every bound. Dan could speak and that was all, but his words of kindness now seemed to fall unheeded by the flying animal.

The Mexican's arms and hands hung free at his side, but Dan could not prevail upon the fellow to unfasten his fetters. In fact, the wounded wretch's head rolled about upon his shoulders in a manner that alarmed the boy. He was growing weak and helpless from the pain of his wound and loss of blood. Dan could see his

arms dangling helpless at his side, and a shudder passed through his frame.

The stallion soon passed out of sight and sound of the pursuers. The lariat hung dangling from his neck and trailing behind, and upon this the horse finally stepped with a hind foot and was jerked to his knees, throwing Dan and the Mexican forward over his head to the earth.

But in an instant the horse was up and off, once more a free spirit of the desert.

A low, agonized moan escaped the Mexican's lips as he and Dan pitched forward to the earth.

Dan essayed to rise, but the helpless wretch upon his back held him down. He noticed that the Mexican was breathing hard—that his hands were thrown out now and then, the fingers working feebly as if trying to clutch at something.

Again and again Dan endeavored to tear his hands from his bonds, but in vain. He no longer made appeals to the Mexican, for he now realized that the fellow had become unconscious.

By a desperate effort the youth succeeded in staggering to his feet. The Mexican's entire weight hung upon him, and he was compelled to bend forward in order to stand. The situation was horrible to the Prince, but he realized that the worst was to come, and his brain fairly grew dizzy.

He took a few steps forward, the feet of the Mexican dragging behind, his head lying forward on the boy's neck, then stopped. He gazed around him, wishing for the coming of his captors, but no one was to be seen.

The moon was swinging rapidly down the eastern sky, and presently day, with its burning heat, would be upon him.

Suddenly the Mexican seemed to rally. A few incoherent words escaped his lips, and he tugged feebly yet frantically at the cords that lashed him to Desert Dan. But his efforts lasted for only a few seconds when he straightened up; his limbs seeming to become rigid; a quiver ran through his frame; there was a strange rattling in his throat, and the next instant the whole body fell limp upon Desert Dan, dragging the boy to the earth.

As they went down a cry of horror escaped Desert Dan's lips for he realized that the Mexican was dead, that he was lashed to a ghastly corpse!

CHAPTER XIII.

MOMENTS OF HORROR.

THE situation of Desert Dan can better be imagined than described. Lashed to the repulsive corpse of the Mexican, his very soul shuddered with horror, and again he tore frantically at the bonds about his wrists, but his efforts only increased his agony of mind and body. He could not get rid of his ghastly burden.

Again he arose and attempted to walk. He went but a few paces and sunk down, his brain almost aflame. The dead body was growing heavy as lead and his strength, so severely tested for hours, was failing. To add to the horror of his situation, coyotes, attracted by the smell of blood from the dead man's wounds, were coming around him.

In hopes that Tom Rattler and his young companions, or even his late captors, might come to his rescue, he shouted at the top of his lungs, but no answer came back—not even an echo of his own voice.

The red streaks of morning dawn gave him hope. He laid down, for with his stiffening burden he must either lay or stand, to await the coming of day in hopes it would bring relief.

One, two hours passed—they seemed like days. The sun came up. The coyotes vanished. Once more Desert Dan struggled to his feet. He glanced about him. Nothing but sage-brush and cacti was visible. Life all seemed to have vanished from that desert and left him alone with that horrible corpse.

Hot and fiery the sun drifted up the eastern sky. Heat, hunger, thirst and horror were preying upon the youth's body and mind. Not one in a thousand would have stood up under the awful strain half so long as he had already. But Dan was growing sick. He knew by the tightening of the lariat that the body of the Mexican was fast bloating. In fact, he could begin to see a hand and arm extending out from behind on either side.

Crawling to a sage-bush, the young Prince of the Saddle thrust his head into the bush. Both its shade and odor were refreshing; but there he expected to lie until rescued by the hands of men

or death. He had been there but a few minutes when he heard a sound like the rustling of wings. He opened his eyes, and to his horror saw a vulture standing on the earth within a few paces of him with its wrinkled, coral neck outstretched, looking toward him as if in some doubt. Full well the boy knew the winged scavenger was there to feed upon his dead companion. Others were wheeling about in the air overhead and slowly descending in contracting circles to join their mate in a morning banquet. Dan did not move nor utter a sound. Slowly his mind was growing indifferent to his surroundings. A haze was settling over him. From the distance floated the sound of strange voices; weird and fantastic forms came trooping around him in mid-air, and gnomish figures bowed and postured about him, blowing their feverish breath in his face, and uttering strange gutturals.

Suddenly, in the midst of all, there was a crash like a clan of thunder, a cry and the winnowing flight of wings. Desert Dan, half delirious, attempted to rise, but the bloating corpse held him down. He opened wide his eyes and gazed wildly around him. He could see nothing, but became conscious of moving—floating away through space, and when at last he shook off the horrible nightmare that had played such pranks with his overwrought brain, the first thing of which he became conscious was of lying upon a couch, and of the presence of an angelic face bending over him.

It was the face of Zulita, the girl-waif of the desert!

CHAPTER XIV.

TROUBLE IN CAMP.

THE escape of Black Robber with Desert Dan and the wounded Mexican caused considerable excitement among the outlaws. A few of them gave chase. The stallion quickly left them behind, and they returned furious with rage and disappointment. The escape of Dan with the fatally-wounded Mexican was of little concern to them; it was the horse they wanted, though it was not the horse they had fondly hoped to secure.

Kit Bandy bore his burden uncomplainingly, and in the course of an hour or two Spring Basin was reached, Kit's burden removed and the old man securely lashed to a cedar that stood near the camp-fire.

Bandy's true character had been discovered through a scout Captain Sangre had sent to follow him to the sink where Rattler and the three boys had halted. Unobserved, the cunning Long-Ears had crept to within earshot of the pit, and, lying concealed behind a sage-bush, heard nearly every word that passed between Jaguar Head and the "stranded" four—enough, in fact, to fully confirm Sangre's suspicions.

But there was one thing in Old Kit's chieftainship that the outlaws overlooked: he had never been false to his followers who were not of the outlaw gang proper. On the contrary, he had proven himself a subordinate leader of signal ability and cunning during the short time he had been among the Mescaleros. It is true he was availing himself of the license of a detective in ingratiating himself into the red-skins' favor, and really expected to serve his own interests more than theirs.

The nearest he ever came to deceiving his followers was when he had Ben and Frank "planted" and left alive on the desert. He did that in hopes of saving the boys' lives. He was afraid to take them to camp through fear of their being assassinated by the outlaws. At that time his force was superior to Captain Sangre's, and so his word was law.

The meeting of the outlaws under Sangre and the Apaches under Jaguar Head, at Spring Basin, was purely accidental. Jaguar Head's followers were Reservation Indians, while the Apaches with the Desert Pirates were outlaw savages, and while they were the best of friends, they had never been allies until that evening when they attacked Ben Mead and Frank Warfield.

The coming of Swift-Wing and his gang to Spring Basin put a different phase upon the situation, for the new party was a part of Sangre's force, and that worthy now assumed an aggressive character, and was disposed to ignore Jaguar Head and his dozen-and-two warriors.

Captain Sangre's force had now augmented to some forty men, composed of Apaches, Mexicans and Americans, and a more desperate and murderous-looking gang never banded together.

When Sangre and Swift-Wing went to attack Rattler and his friends in the sink, and secure Jaguar Head, not one of the latter's warriors

was taken along. In fact, half of the outlaws were left to watch Jaguar Head's braves, though the latter never mistrusted what was up until their chief was marched into camp in bonds.

Promptly the Apaches made objections to the imprisonment of their chief, and demanded his release. The fact that the outlaws had found him to really be Kit Bandy proved nothing against him as Jaguar Head. He had been a leader after the young Apache warrior's heart, and his arrest was looked upon as an insult to his followers.

But Captain Sangre cared nothing for their murmurings. His force was now more than three to one and he proposed to have things his own sweet way. Kit Bandy was in his power, and the death of Captain Vulcan at the detective's hands, was fresh in his mind.

In reply to one of Jaguar Head's warriors, called Growling Bear, for the release of his chief, Sangre replied:

"Kit Bandy is my prisoner. He is the wolf that hunted down the great Black Vulcan. He will destroy the Apaches. He hunts men to destroy them. Jaguar Head, the white wolf, shall die before we leave this camp!"

This declaration was received with an outburst of applause from the lips of Captain Sangre's followers, but Jaguar Head's braves showed their teeth, as it were. Trouble was brewing in the camp.

The night was now well advanced, but sleep was unthought of by outlaw or savage.

Jaguar Head's followers, while remaining in the same camp were disposed to keep aloof from the outlaws. There was not a movement of the latter made but what it was observed by the former.

An hour passed. Captain Sangre finally arose and left the camp, going in the direction of the entrance to the valley, as he told Swift-Wing, to give the men there on guard some special instructions.

The camp was located at the lower end of the valley, which was about a mile long, near a spring of water, and in the midst of a growth of scrubby cedars. Just back of camp arose a perpendicular bluff to the height of thirty feet, and upon this bluff, clearly outlined against the sky, about half an hour after Sangre's departure, Growling Bear, the Apache, suddenly appeared, and shouted to those below:

"Apaches and pale-faces—followers of Captain Blood! listen to what I have to say to you! You have our chief a prisoner. You are many and we are few. You wait in vain for your chief to return. He is in our power. While you talked and laughed at Jaguar Head, we stole away and your chief is now our prisoner. Release Jaguar Head and your captain shall go free. Kill him and we will kill. We are strong in our defense. We defy you to take him from us. I have spoken."

A painful silence followed this startling declaration.

A grim smile flitted over the face of Kit Bandy.

Captain Sangre was absent it is true, but the outlaws waited several minutes before stirring, as if to have Growling Bear's words verified by the continued absence of their captain.

And when half an hour more had passed and he came not, there arose a murmur in the camp that foretold the coming of a storm—that Spring Basin was yet to be the scene of bloodshed.

CHAPTER XV.

AN EXCHANGE.

GREAT excitement prevailed in the outlaw camp over the capture and concealment of the person of Captain Sangre by the revengeful followers of Jaguar Head.

Old Kit had seen Growling Bear leave camp shortly after Sangre's departure, and he had also seen his own followers leave camp one by one until all were gone. He knew something was going on and was prepared for some surprise, and then when it came, the outlaws were so enraged that it was all Swift-Wing, next in command, could do to save him from death then and there.

When the frantic gang had become somewhat cooled down, scouts were immediately sent out to locate the position of the Jaguar Head party. One of these scouts was met by Growling Bear, himself, and quietly conducted to the very place where Captain Sangre lay bound hand and foot.

That place was in a spacious excavation in the bluff facing the valley, and not over seventy rods from the outlaw camp. It had evidently been made by the hand of man, but at a period that might have dated back to the time when the Mexican banditti terrorized all the country

south of Santa Fé and west of the Pecos. It could be entered only by one narrow passage, and could have been held by a dozen men against a thousand. Growling Bear had discovered the place that day soon after their arrival in the basin while searching for game, little dreaming that it was to serve him and his friends so important a purpose.

"Wolf-Yelp," the outlaw scout, made as thorough inspection of the place as the darkness would permit—even conversing with Captain Sangre—and then returned and reported to his friends the impregnable position occupied by the Jaguar Heads.

"We can starve them!" declared Swift-Wing, "and we will!"

"Starve an Apache will ye?" replied an outlaw; "why, they'll eat the captain, himself, before they'll surrender or starve. Boys, it begins to look as though Reservation red-skins are too many for us, after all, and that we'll have to surrender our prisoner or leave here minus a captain."

"I'm not so sure of that," responded Swift-Wing; "there's but one Kit Bandy in all this big, old universe, and there are acres of Jacarilla Jims out of which to make Captain Sangre—Bloods. If Bandy gets away from here safe, mind what I tell you, every Desert Pirate will have to hunt his hole inside of a month, or take his medicine around his neck instead of down it."

The majority of the outlaws did not agree with the villain, who would like to have stepped into Captain Sangre's shoes, and the idea of laying siege to the Jaguar Head stronghold was not favorably entertained for even a moment. So the only alternative was to proceed with Kit Bandy to the cave and accept the terms dictated by Growling Bear.

Jaguar Head was untied and the party started away with him, leaving but two sound men to guard the camp.

On arriving in the vicinity of the intrenched Apaches, a long-range parley was held as to which party should advance to the other.

Fearing treachery the outlaws were afraid to enter the cave, and those in the cave were afraid to venture out.

Finally the outlaws, emboldened by their superior force, and the assurance that Jaguar Head and his band would never be able to escape from the cave alive, sent Bandy in charge of Wolf-Yelp into the cave.

In a few minutes the escort returned bringing Captain Sangre unharmed. His appearance was greeted by a great shout of triumph, and those in the cave notified, by a volley of shots fired into the entrance, that the armistice was at an end, and war begun in dead earnest.

Jaguar Head saw at once that they were in no enviable position—that while they could defend themselves against invasion, it would be certain death to attempt escape from the cave while the outlaws lay in wait for them.

Hunger and thirst, however, they could not keep out, and so the fertile brain of Old Kit must furnish an expedient. The Apaches were acting in good faith with him, and while he was availing himself, as before stated, of the license of a frontier detective, he was too honorable to do aught that would cost one Apache follower his life.

The plan of escape most feasible to Kit's mind was by tunneling out. The sides of the cave and the roof were principally clay with a little gravel, and by digging obliquely upward he believed they would come out upon the plain where they could not be seen from below. Just how far they would have to dig and what obstructions they might meet, of course they could not determine.

Old Kit started the work digging with tomahawk and knife. He commenced in the roof of the cave and as the dirt was loosened it fell at his feet and served to raise him as he tunneled upward.

By turns the digging continued without intermission, two Apaches keeping watch at the entrance. As there was no delay in removing the loosened dirt, the work progressed rapidly.

They finally passed through the clay and reached a sandy soil where digging was easy. Kit thought the surface must be near, but in this he was mistaken. They were compelled to dig at least ten feet further before they emerged on the plain—altogether some twenty feet.

When the tunnel had thus been completed Old Kit poked his head and took a survey of his surroundings. Behind him lay the desert and in front of him he could just see the dark-green tops of the cedars under whose cover the outlaws were lying in wait in the basin below.

Descending to the cave Bandy went down to

the entrance and fired a couple shots into the thicket outside to let the outlaws know they were still on the alert in the cave. The robbers returned the compliment by firing a volley into the cave, one of the bullets grazing Bandy's shoulder and drawing blood.

The retreat was now begun. Bandy took the lead and was the first to scramble up the inclined hole and step out into the moonlight. One by one the Apaches crawled out. Never were men more cautious. A shadow could have been less noiseless.

When all were out Kit led the way back into the plain ways, then swung around and entered to the basin again.

When under cover of the cedars Bandy sent a scout to see how matters were at camp. He soon returned and reported the camp in charge of but two or three men besides those wounded out on the plain.

The natural marauding instinct of the Apache asserted itself, and every warrior became eager to make a raid on the camp and corral, nor was Old Kit one whit less eager to strike them a blow that would cripple them severely.

Again Bandy took the lead and with the silence of phantoms they moved down upon the camp, slew the guards, appropriated their arms and ammunition, destroyed much camp equipment, then mounted their own horses, stampeded the robbers, and then started to leave the valley.

They had tarried, however, just a minute too long, for the party at the cave, hearing the confusion at camp, hastened to investigate the cause. They came up just as the Apaches were riding off and killed three of them at the first fire. Kit and the others made good their escape.

When Captain Sangre looked upon his camp and the destruction that had been wrought, his fury knew no bounds; and when he learned, some hours later, that Jaguar Head and his band had escaped from the cave, and that they were the authors of the havoc and ruin in camp, he became crazed with rage, and swore eternal vengeance on Kit Bandy and his Apache friends.

CHAPTER XVI.

A TRANSITION TO DESERT DAN.

We left Desert Dan just recovering from a state of unconsciousness to find himself lying upon a soft couch, and the fair face of the mysterious waif of the night, Zulita, standing by his side and gazing down into his face. But it was a long time before he could relieve his mind of its last impressions—the dead Mexican lashed upon his back; the coral-necked vulture; the winnowing wings above him; the hot sun; the pain of the contracting lasso; the extending arms of the corpse!

The transition had been so great that he thought he must be dreaming—lying still upon the desert. Yet plainly he could see the fair face of Zulita framed in with its wealth of dark hair, and her slight, willowy form dressed in snow-white. He could see a roof above and walls about them. Yet he heard no sound. He was speechless himself—held silent as if in a trance.

Suddenly, however, he sees the girl, Zulita, start up, a smile flit over her face. He sees her lips move—hears her say:

"Desert Dan, you are feeling better."

The sound of her voice broke the spell that held him motionless—speechless. He started up as all the horrors of the desert flooded his brain, and gazed around him like one bewildered.

Zulita smiled, then broke into a little laugh as she again said, to the confused youth:

"You are perfectly safe, Desert Dan, and you must rest quietly. You have passed through a severe spell of prostration."

"Where am I? and how came I here?"

"You were found unconscious on the desert—"

"Ah!" he broke in, with a shudder, "lashed to a bloated corpse!"

"No matter, Desert Dan; you were found there and brought here, and been kindly cared for."

"And you are the maid Zulita?"

"Yes; you recognize me, though we met but once before," the strange little beauty responded.

"But where am I?" queried Dan, resting upon his elbow in a reclining position and gazing around him, and then up into the maiden's face.

"When you are stronger, I will tell you all you may wish to know. For the present, let it

suffice that you are with friends. My good father will be in soon. You have been here since morning. It is now nearly evening again. You must be hungry and perhaps thirsty. I will order you food and drink. Excuse me a moment."

Zulita rose and left the room. Dan watched her until she had disappeared. Then he glanced around him. The room was small, but clean and neatly furnished. A small window admitted light. There were pictures on the walls, and on a little table near his couch stood a bouquet of flowers that diffused fragrance through the room.

From the desert and the companionship of death, to a quiet room and the companionship of a beautiful girl, was a great change; yet Dan knew nothing of how the transformation had been made.

Hours had passed since he had fainted on the desert, overcome with pain, heat and horror, and in that time he had been carried to that room unconscious. But was it the room of a home hidden away on the desert?

The return of Zulita ended his mental speculations. The maiden brought him some food and a cup of tea. He thanked her most kindly, and sitting up on his couch he partook of the viands. Never did food taste sweeter. He ate heartily for he was nearly famished.

After his repast he felt ever so much better and rapidly grew stronger. He soon became anxious to be out—to be on the move—to know where he was and who the good people were to whom he was indebted for their kindness.

Suddenly a heavy footstep sounded near, and a tall, noble-looking man entered the room. Dan raised his eyes until they met those of the stranger.

"This is my father, Jean Ballé, Desert Dan," Zulita said, rising as her father entered.

Desert Dan, in his frank and hearty way, extended his hand, saying:

"Mr. Ballé, I am very glad to meet you."

Jean Ballé was of sixty years, tall and broad-shouldered, and deep-chested, with long white hair and beard, a pleasant yet keen blue eye, and strong intellectual features. A grim smile was upon his face as he took the extended hand of the Boy Prince of the Saddle and pressed it warmly, saying:

"My boy, I am glad to see you around again. We found you in a very sad plight."

"I presume so," responded Dan, "for I have a vivid recollection of lying down on the desert lashed to a corpse. I must have fallen asleep, for the next I knew I was right here."

"Yes, you were sound asleep," added Ballé, "and for awhile we thought you were in your last sleep. I think you had fainted."

"Am I far from where you found me?" the youth asked, gazing into his host's eye with an eager look.

Jean Ballé smiled, stroked his beard and replied:

"You shall see for yourself shortly; it will be well for you to walk out. I will send in Zulita for you in an hour. Here are your clothes; you may dress yourself and be ready when she comes."

"Thank you," said Dan gratefully.

Jean Ballé arose and left the room. Desert Dan arose and dressed himself, feeling, with the exception of a slight pain in the head, as well as he ever did.

Presently there was a light footstep heard at the door and little Zulita came in, her pretty face aglow with blushes and smiles.

"Father sent me to conduct you to the house-top to spend the evening," she said.

"Your father is very kind, and I am ready to accompany you," Dan replied, rising to his feet.

Together the two passed out of the little room into a hallway, and thence into the open air, that was all aglow with the radiance of a glorious sunset.

CHAPTER XVII.

BEAUTY, FLOWERS, MUSIC AND A DEMON.

INTO a little square or plaza in the rear of the long, low adobe building, of Mexican style of hacienda, Zulita Ballé conducted her young guest, Desert Dan, and then turning they ascended a broad flight of steps to the low, flat roof of the house where a scene met the eyes of the lad that fairly bewildered him. And this is what he beheld: A lovely little oblong valley walled in by green-clad bluffs that were fringed with piñon and cedar along their base. A green, grassy plaza interspersed with chaparrals of young cedars, stretching away toward the west for half a mile. Two or three horses, a cow,

and a herd of goats grazing in sight down the vale. Nothing beyond the rim of this sunken valley is to be seen except sky.

The house-top was large and wide and covered with dirt and gravel. Around its margin grew creeping vines that ran over the edges and falling in green festoons to the earth completely covered the outer walls of the building. There was a profusion of semi-tropical plants and flowers also growing along the borders of the roof, that filled the air with the incense of a paradise.

"By Jingrickies!" burst from the lips of the astonished youth, as he gazed around him upon the lovely scene which the fiery glow of the setting sun brought out in all its emerald beauty, "this seems to be an enchanted valley—a valley suspended in the air, for I can see no desert—nothing beyond except sky and space."

Before Zulita could reply another surprise awaited the boy. Jean Ballé appeared upon the house-top with another young girl leaning upon his arm, a girl of about Zulita's age—a slender, pale-faced, blue-eyed, golden-haired girl—so fair, so delicate, that it seemed a breath of air would have wafted her away.

"This, Desert Dan, is my daughter, Lucille," said the old man.

Dan bowed politely, but was too greatly confused and bewildered to speak.

"Lucille," continued Ballé, "is just recovering from a long siege of sickness, and is weak. But she has been anxious to meet Desert Dan, the Prince of the Saddle."

"It's an honor I don't deserve," the boy managed to reply, manifesting some confusion.

The four seated themselves upon benches and entered into conversation, the vivacious Zulita taking the lead in a manner pleasing to all.

In the course of ten minutes there was another party of three persons joined them on the roof. Two of them were colored—one male and one female. The third was undoubtedly of Spanish blood—a man of some forty years, with a lithe, supple figure neatly dressed in the suit of a ranchero, and with all the bearing of a gentleman. He was introduced to Dan as Juan, the Scout, and as the individual who had found the youth on the desert and brought him there to Paradise Vale.

Old Jubal, the male negro servant, carried in his hands a banjo and guitar. The latter he handed to Zulita.

Turning to Juan, the Scout, Jean Ballé asked:

"Do you think it safe, Juan, to use the instruments?"

"Perfectly safe, señor, I should say. The desert seems to be entirely free of all dangers."

"The desert!" exclaimed Dan, unable to maintain his silence longer, "then this is an oasis in the desert?"

"Yes, my son, this is Paradise Vale, and is just ten miles from Spring Basin, in the very heart of a barren sand-waste," responded Ballé, "and it is sunken so deep that its existence cannot be detected until you are on its very rim."

"And you have never been troubled here by outlaws or Indians?" Dan questioned.

"To the best of my knowledge, or, rather, Juan's, no Indian or stranger except yourself, has been nearer than ten miles of this place since we have lived here."

"You have lived here a long time," said Dan, "judging from appearances?"

"Some years," responded Ballé, evasively.

Jubal, give us one of your melodies." Old Jubal struck in on a low negro melody into which the darky threw all his soul, and his notes awakened in the breast of Desert Dan an enthusiasm that had lain dormant there since his mother's sweet voice had become hushed in the silence of death.

When Jubal had finished, Zulita took up her guitar, and as her fingers flashed over the strings the very heavens seemed to bend a listening ear, and as Dan sat in enrapt silence, his eyes gazing down the valley, he was startled to see a noble black horse emerge from the cover of a clump of cedars, arch its neck, prick up his ears and stand motionless, as if drinking in the sweet, enchanting strains of music from Zulita's instrument.

After listening a few minutes, it started off on a lone toward the hacienda, and as it came nearer, Desert Dan could see he was the very counterpart of Black Robber.

From the beautiful black the boy transferred his gaze to Zulita and the guitar, for he was a lover of music as well as of horses.

As he did so, the music suddenly ceased. He saw the maiden's hand hang motionless above the strings, and lifting his eyes to her face he saw it pale and blanched, her lips slightly part-

ed, and her dark eyes staring wildly as though suddenly transfixed with terror.

The youth quickly turned his eyes in the direction the maiden was gazing, when, to his own surprise and utmost terror, he beheld a hideous Indian warrior, who was standing on the steps, his head and shoulders just reaching above the edge of the roof and leering upon them like a triumphant demon.

CHAPTER XVIII.

EXCITEMENT ON THE HOUSE-TOP.

AT sight of the hideous red-skin Desert Dan sprung to his feet, and Juan, the Scout, snatching a revolver from his belt, in a twinkling aimed a shot at the savage; but just as the weapon exploded the Prince of the Saddle struck up the muzzle and the bullet whistled harmlessly over the intruder's head.

A cry of terror burst from the lips of Zulita and Lucille.

"Treachery!" hissed Juan, as he flashed a look at Desert Dan, again cocked his revolver and turned it toward the Indian who still held his position on the steps.

"Hold on, Juan!" Desert Dan again interrupted, "that Indian is Kit Bandy, the Mountain Detective!"

Juan lowered his revolver, and the Indian stepped up onto the house-top and gazing at the astonished assembly burst into a low, chuckling laugh.

"Is it true? are you Kit Bandy?" demanded Jean Ballé.

"Desert Danny speaks the truth," answered the disguised man; "I am Ka-ristopher Kolumbuss Bandy, and as gentle as a maiden and harmless as a butterfly. So good-evening, people! I must beg your pardon for this unceremonious intrusion. I couldn't help it. Falling into paradise here, I have been wanderin' around intoxicated-frunk on its glory, its music and beauty, its sunset and flowers and—Desert Dan in the very midst of it all."

It devolved upon Desert Dan to introduce the old mountain and plains detective to Jean Ballé and his family, and when this was done Old Kit soon set the party at ease, and for ten minutes held them spellbound by the thrilling story of his adventures.

His personal appearance had not been improved by his experiences of the last twenty-four hours. Shorn of all his barbaric toggery, with the various colored paints on his face blending into one dirty hue, he was indeed, a wretched-looking specimen of an Indian chief.

But as usual, Bandy made himself at home and soon had won the confidence of all, and became the source of no little merriment by the vein of whimsical humor that ran through all his conversation and his stories.

He questioned Desert Dan about the result of the fight in the sink the night before, and as to how he had escaped from the desert to find refuge in the home of Jean Ballé.

Dan told him all he knew of the conflict, but could give no information as to the fate of Tom Rattler and his two young friends.

"Poor ole Tom Rattler!" sighed Bandy; "I'm afraid it went hard with him, for that gang o' cut-throats under Sangre are the wust varmints that ever went unquartered. Ole Tom Rattler war one o' the bravest men and warmest friends that ever swatted a red-skin or divided his last crumb with a fellow-man. But, Danny, what became of your black stallion?"

"He got away from under me and the Mexican last night," replied Dan, "and that's the last I've seen of him. Whether he fell into the outlaws' clutches or has escaped back to his old haunts, I know not; but I do know his getting away knocked me out of one thousand good dollars, for that was what Don Alvar de Vaca was to pay me for delivering him at Aztec Ranch on the Rio Hondo."

"Wal, by the horn o' Joshua!" exclaimed Bandy, "that's been the most coveted hoss that ever dashed sand into the atmosphere. But after all it's not the hoss that's wanted so much as the secret of a foul, treacherous murder, and of the lost mines of Trinchera that it is believed the horse carries. That's what I've been after, at any rate, for six months."

"Ah! then you are on the trail of a murderer, Kit Bandy," said Jean Ballé, manifesting some anxiety in the detective story.

"Yes, but it's a cold trail, my friend; and since last night's discovery it has vanished entirely, and if a few of us ever gets out of this desert alive, we can be thankful for small favors. I must confess the situation is not the safest, for Captain Sangre's dander's up, and that's a premium on my ambrosial locks."

"Oh, dear, dear!" exclaimed Lucille, clasping

her thin, white hands and drawing nearer to her father, "I hope those terrible Desert Pirates will not find Paradise Vale!"

"If they do find it, it will be just as I found it," Kit explained, "by mere accident. I was lookin' for a hidin' place, I'll admit, but was on the very brink of this Eden before I knew it war in existence. Then I fell into it, and began to explore it. I found it war peopled, and that there were domestic animals in no small numbers grazing herein. I slaked my thirst at two different springs, and came mortal nigh washin' my hands and face, but I didn't. But if the pirates do strike this bower while Desert Dan and your Uncle Ka-ristopher Bandy is here, Miss Lucille, they'll hear different music from that which charmed the savage breast o' Jaguar Head a few minutes ago and drew him up them steps as though a rope was 'round his neck and fourteen hosses pullin' on it."

"A shot has never been fired in anger in this valley," spoke in Juan, the Scout; "but all the same we have been always ready to defend ourselves if attacked. There's not a man or woman here but can use a rifle or revolver with splendid skill."

By this time it was dark, and on account of Lucille's health it was suggested by her father that they all retire within doors.

On descending from the roof Kit Bandy proposed to Desert Dan that they take a stroll about the valley to see that no danger really lurked therein. The Saddle Prince readily accepted, for he was only too glad to get out and test his strength, and be assured that he was himself again, despite the ordeal through which he had passed.

Excusing themselves to Jean Ballé and his family, the two left the hacienda and strolled out toward the east side of the valley.

Meanwhile Juan, the Scout, had gone up to the main entrance to the valley to see that all was right there. He was afraid the Desert Pirates might track Old Kit there, and as there was but one entrance by which a horseman could get into the vale, the place could be easily watched, at least.

In the shadows under the bluff some fifteen rods from the hacienda, Kit Bandy and Desert Dan stopped.

"Kit," said the Boy Prince, "what do you think of Jean Ballé and his family?"

"I think he's a confounded ole looney," responded Bandy, "keeping them two agonizin' pretty gals here exposed to danger, and away from the society o' civilization."

"You don't think it could be possible that the man is a fugitive hiding here from justice, do you, Kit?"

"He may be an outlaw and then he may not. Like I, Ka-ristopher Kolumbuss Bandy, he may be lurkin' here—hidin' from the wrath of a cantankerous wife."

"What? Kit Bandy a married man?" exclaimed Dan.

"Well, I should say so with thunderous emphasis, Danny," Bandy answered; "I'm too much married, and that's why I'm among Ingins and pirates and b'ars, and I'm no outlaw either, or fugitive from justice, and that may be what's ailin' Jean Ballé. But it can't be that the mother of them gals war an old Sabina Bandy o' a woman. If I war a half a century younger, I'd start a romance in Paradise by fallin' in love with one o' them gals. Old Tom Rattler'd do it, anyhow—fall in love with both o' them. Old Tom's a terrible fool 'bout a pretty gal. But gals aside, Danny, I'll venture to say that Jean Ballé is not that man's true name. I have met with a dozen just such men in my rambles 'round through the hills and over the plains, and there was always some secret—some mystery 'bout every one o' them."

"Jean Ballé is of French extraction, at least, I should say. He doesn't look like a man hiding away here through fear—a criminal outlaw; he looks more like a man of sorrow, and withal a high-minded man of honor. But, if he was proven to be the leader of the Black Arroyo Massacre—the murderer of Horace Mead, hisself, I couldn't disturb him on account o' them twin fairies. There is one thing about him, however, that sticks in my craw: when I told him I was on the trail of a murderer, he started up as though I'd touched a tender spot."

"That's no more than natural, under the circumstances," Desert Dan observed; "most any one would do the same, guilty or not. But, Kit, did you see that black horse here in the park that is an exact counterpart of Black Robber?"

"Horn o' Joshua!" exclaimed Bandy; "no, I did not! Who knows but it may be the black colt o' Carlita Bond's story—the sire o' Black

Robber? I'd like to see that hoss, Danny, and lay my hands upon him."

"I think I can take you right to him, Mr. Bandy."

"Lead forth, Dan'l."

The Prince of the Saddle led the way to where he had seen Old Jubal turn the horses into a corral. They found some five or six horses there, and among them was the black in question.

The animals manifested some uneasiness at sight of the strangers, but Desert Dan, by exerting that peculiar power he seemed to hold over the horse, soon had them all around him licking his hand and receiving his caresses.

The black horse was quite gentle, and, while Desert Dan held him, Old Kit advanced and pressed his hand over the animal's shoulders and withers. He was fully five minutes in making an examination of the horse.

Finally he turned away, touched Dan on the arm, and together they passed out of the corral and walked back to their former position under the bluff. Then Bandy turned, facing the boy, and said, in a low tone:

"Desert Dan'l, that black hoss out there is the very hoss so many o' us have been after!"

"Great gingrickys!" exclaimed the youth, "you don't say so, Mr. Bandy!"

"He's got just such a scar on the shoulder," Kit went on, "as I'd expected to find, but there was no foreign substance under the skin. If it is the right hoss, that locket was taken from out its novel receptacle, and by who?"

"And, again, Danny: if that black colt fell into the hands of Jean Ballé, he possesses the secret I'm huntin' for, and, what's more, one or the other o' them two gals—either Zulita or Lucille—is 'Dolly' Mead, the child fugitive—the only survivor of the Black Arroyo Massacre!"

CHAPTER XIX.

A SAVAGE WAR-CRY.

PONDERING a minute over Kit Bandy's words, Desert Dan wondered which of the two girls could be Dolly Mead, should the old detective's deductions be true.

"Kit," he finally said, "you surely must be wrong about this matter."

"I may be, it's true," admitted Bandy, "but there's a black hoss which any one can see is well along in years. He has a scar on his left shoulder that'll answer for Horace Mead's incision for the little locket. There are two gals, either one of which 'll answer for Dolly's age—about fifteen. You see, lad, we detectives sometimes jump at shadows in hopes of finding a substance. When lookin' for clews we let nothin' escape."

"Now it's true, Ballé may have the black colt sent out from the arroyo, and yet know nothin' o' the massacre, or the gal, Dolly, but he acted just a bit uneasy when I told him I was on a trail. At least I thought so, and at the time I knew nothin' of his havin' a black hoss either."

"The next thing, however, is to get the real facts. I don't like to come right out and ask the man 'bout the hoss and all his private affairs. I don't want to do any sneak-work, and yet I must know certain before I leave this valley. But, say, Danny, I want to tell you a bit of a secret before we go back to the hacienda: Just at daybreak this mornin' I pulled out into the desert with ten o' my Apache warriors, and lay night all day in a sand-pit a few miles from Spring Basin. As night was again approachin', we pulled out for the east, seein' Captain Sangre and his gang didn't leave the basin, for the very good reason that we'd stampeded over half their hosses. By accident we stumbled onto this valley and stepped into it unobserved."

"Then your Apache friends are near here?" Desert Dan observed, as his hand dropped to the revolver presented him by Juan, the scout, and a smile flitted over his face.

"Yes, but you needn't worry 'bout yer skulp, boy, for them 'Paches are Kit Bandy heroes. They stood by me at fearful cost, and here's to them as long as I can pull a trigger or sound a Jaguar Head war-whoop."

"But I expect it would be a little ticklish if them gals knew the warriors were so near, and I smile to know Juan, the scout, has overlooked their presence. As I scart you nearly all to death on the house-top by my ferocious and warlike presence, I—"

"My jolly old friend," interrupted Desert Dan, "I'll confess you make a sockin' Jaguarish-lookin' Ingin, but, by the holy gingrickys! I'll give you a prize if you'll wash the paint and dust of the desert off your face so that I could see what Old Kit Bandy really looks like."

"Boy, you'd be disappointed if I did. You'd see little of the once handsome and Napoleonic

Ka-ristopher Ko-lumbuss Bandy—the only original Kit Bandy. Why? Well, as I told you, once I was married, but now, alas! who am I? what am I? why am I? I have been rent and torn and seamed and left for dead, as it were. Hot water, skillets, sad-irons and other domestic and culinary implements my wife used on me to persuade me that she was a power in the Bandy bungalow. I recognized that fact and fled to the haunts of the grizzly, the Indian and the outlaw, disfigured for life. But, Danny, as soon as I can obtain the proper amount of moisture, I'll wash away all signs of Jaguar Head, that you may look upon the Ruins o' a San Gabriel Mission, a dismantled Alhambra, a storm-battered and broken monarch o' the forest, the downfall o' the Roman Empire. Boy, let me give you this bit o' advice—"

But he never gave the advice, for at this moment his words were cut short by a piercing shriek from the direction of the hacienda. It was a female's shriek, and was immediately followed by a fierce, savage yell from the same direction.

"Great horn o' Joshua!" burst from Old Bandy's lips, "Danny, the Desert Pirates have found Paradise Vale, and it will be drenched with blood! Come, lad; if we would save them gals, we must do some fierce, red work!"

CHAPTER XX.

JEAN BALLÉ HAS A CALLER.

AFTER Kit Bandy and Desert Dan had left the hacienda, Jean Ballé and his household seated themselves in their spacious sitting-room to await the return of their guests and pass the hours until bedtime in conversation, reading and prayer.

Zulita and Lucille both noticed that their father seemed troubled and uneasy of late. He talked but little, walked the floor with knitted brows, ever and anon glancing out at the door.

"Father," Lucille finally said, "the coming of Kit Bandy, I fear, has disturbed your peace of mind. Surely you have no fears of the old man?"

"None whatever, daughter," replied the father, "but the presence of so many outlaws and savages within ten miles of Paradise Vale I dislike to hear of. You see there has been no wind strong enough to drift the desert sand for two days, and I am afraid the tracks of Zulita's and Juan's horses, as well as those of Kit Bandy, may be the means of leading the Desert Pirates down upon us."

"Father, do not worry," said the brave and courageous little Zulita; "God has protected us in this valley for years. He has kept dangers wide of our quiet, happy home. Let us unite in earnest prayer that He will continue to watch over us and keep us from all harm. Juan, our faithful friend, will guard well the entrance and see that—"

"But, my dear girl," interrupted the father, "he could not keep back a score of murderous outlaws and red-skins if they undertook to ride into the valley. Moreover, enemies on foot could easily gain admission here at various points along the bluffs, wholly unobserved. But we will hope and pray for the best, and, in the mean time, be prepared for the very worst."

As he thus spoke, the old man took from a scabbard hanging on the wall a slender, rapier-like sword, which he laid on a table, and placed alongside of it a brace of revolvers.

In spite of the cheerfulness of his daughters, Jean Ballé seemed to have a strong presentiment of coming danger, and he had scarcely placed his weapons of defense upon the table when the tread of a booted foot on the porch in front of the hacienda was heard, and thinking it was Bandy and Desert Dan returning, he advanced and unbolted and opened the door.

To his utmost surprise and consternation, he found himself confronted by a strange man dressed in a suit after the style of the Mexican ranchero, with high-topped boots and white sombrero, his waist girdled with pistols and knives.

The moon had just come up and its horizontal rays fell full upon the stranger, in whose rough, bearded face, and the covetous gleam of his fierce, cruel eyes, Jean Ballé recognized in an instant the outward signs of a villain.

"Good-evening, sir!" the stranger said, manifesting an assumed surprise; "you'll pardon my intrusion, I hope. By accident we—I tumbled into this valley, and, seeing your light, came to make an investigation. I confess I'm knocked silly to find a human habitation and fair women and brave men dwelling here. Whose ranch is this, anyhow?"

"Mine, sir," was the evasive reply of Jean Ballé.

"Would you mind telling me who you are?" the stranger asked, though it was clear to Ballé that the fellow was assuming his air of surprise.

"My name, sir, is Jean Ballé."

"Jean Ballé," repeated the impertinent, dropping into a chair that stood on the porch, and tipping his sombrero back upon his head; "well, I am Judson Lowry—better known as—*Captain Sangre!*"

If the villain had expected this announcement to strike fear to the heart of Jean Ballé, he was sadly mistaken, for, without the least emotion whatever, the recluse mildly asked:

"Are you the leader of the Desert Pirates, so called?"

"The same, sir," was the answer, "and I have called here for information. I'm an inquisitive sort of a fellow, and sometimes impertinent. But as I came around here I run up against a horse-corral, and inside the inclosure I found a very noble black stallion. Would you object to telling me *when* and *where* you obtained that horse?"

"I assure you I did not steal him, sir."

"Certainly not, but when and where did you get him?"

"My scout caught him on the plains," responded Ballé.

"Way up east of the Trinchera Mountains, years ago," added the outlaw.

"Is he your horse, Captain Sangre?"

"That depends."

"Upon what?"

"A scar on his left shoulder."

"There's such a scar upon that shoulder, sir."

"*Caramba!* good! do you know what made that scar?"

"It's the result of a wound, I presume, of course."

"Yes, scars usually come from wounds," the villain repeated; "but I see, Jean Ballé, you are uncommunicative. Let me tell you that, while I never met you before—know not why you are livin' in seclusion here in a place I never knew existed until an hour ago, you do not desire to tell me the honest truth regarding the manner in which that horse came into your possession. At least, I think so; and if I am right you or your man, Juan, or both, took from that horse's shoulder a secret, and, perchance, a girl-baby of three years from his back. And if *that* be so, one of those fair girls in the room there must be that little wail, and, again, if that be true, her father's name was Mead, and her mother, a half-Spanish lady, *my sister!*"

"Well," was Jean Ballé's only response.

"If I am right," the outlaw continued, "I demand of you the secret you removed from that horse's shoulder and my niece that I may restore her to her people."

"And if you are wrong, what?"

"I know I am *not* wrong, by your own actions, Jean Ballé."

A low, subdued cry escaped Zulita and Lucille's lips for they heard every word spoken; and the quiet and mild-mannered recluse, becoming excited, confronted the outlaw, exclaiming:

"Scoundrel! you are lying to me like the pirate you are! You do not speak of what you know to be a fact, but are revamping some old story as a pretext to rob me of my children. Sir, I bid you leave here, and at once, or by the gods, you will suffer for this intrusion!"

"Hold down to a calm, Jean Ballé," advised the outlaw in a sneering, warning tone as he rose to his feet; "I know pretty nearly of what I'm talkin' about, and if you refuse to give me the secret I believe you possess, and tell me which of those girls you took from the back of that black colt on or about twelve years ago, I'll be compelled to take both of them to make sure of the right one."

"Villain!" cried Jean Ballé, springing across the room and grasping his sword, "offer to touch one of these girls and this blade will find your heart!"

The outlaw uttered a shrill, prolonged whistle of surprise.

Wild with fear the frail Lucille gave voice to a terrified scream and shrunk back into the corner of the room. But not so with brave and plucky little Zulita, for, drawing a pistol from her pocket, she stood ready to defend her father, her home, her honor.

A low, sardonic laugh burst from the outlaw's lips, and was immediately followed by the rush of many feet outside the door, while a fierce, savage yell broke the long and peaceful silence of Paradise Vale!

CHAPTER XXI.

THE BLOW OF THE INVADER.

UP to the door of his hitueto quiet and happy home Jean Ballé saw a score of forms crowding like a pack of hungry wolves and heard their demoniac cry that sent a shudder to his very heart.

Captain Sangre advanced and stepped inside the door, his face aglow with devilish triumph, ready to despoil the quiet, hidden home and the pure and gentle lives of its inmates.

"You see, Jean Ballé," the bandit said, "I am fully prepared to enforce my demands. I have no desire to spill a drop of human blood, so, if you will therefore give me the secret I crave, I will suffer my little niece to remain with you at least awhile longer."

"Villain!" resolutely persisted the old man, "I have no secret for you, and I warn you to come not one step nearer or you will receive this blade!"

In the mean time, Lucille had fled into an adjoining room and was soon followed by Zulita, who heard a noise as if some one was trying to force an entrance therein.

Captain Sangre did not crowd upon the old man's steel, but stepped aside and admitted a low, heavy-set Mexican with an abnormally large head and a face that had in it more of the animal than the human.

The burly wretch came sliding into the room, a hideous grin upon his repulsive face, and stopped just in front and to one side of Captain Sangre. Then a third person entered and stopped by the Mexican's side. This person was an outlaw Apache.

There were a few moments of silence, which was broken by Captain Sangre, saying:

"Gorilla-Hand, we will have to make the old gent a prisoner."

The Mexican monstrosity uttered a hoarse grunt and fixed his black, snakish eyes on the face of Jean Ballé.

Just then a lithe figure glided into the room from the back way, and, pausing by the side of the recluse, said:

"I'll take a hand in this affair!"

It was Desert Dan, the Boy Prince of the Saddle.

Again the Mexican uttered a hoarse snarl, showing his white teeth as he slowly lifted his knife from its sheath, his body swaying slightly for a spring upon the boy. But Dan seemed to divine his intentions, threw up his hand, in which he held a revolver, and fired point-blank at the Mexican's short, hairy throat.

The outlaw staggered back, threw out his long, gorilla-like arms, gave a coughing mean and fell backward, blood gushing in great mouthfuls from his lips.

So sudden, so unexpected and so daring was this shot, in the very face of a score of outlaws, that Captain Sangre could scarcely realize for a moment what had really happened.

At the same instant that the Mexican went down, the sharp, clear ring of Zulita's revolver was heard in the adjoining room, followed by a dull, heavy fall and a groan.

And to still add to the excitement of that moment and the consternation of Captain Sangre, as well as Jean Ballé, another frightful yell suddenly burst upon the night and was followed by the crash of fire-arms, the ring of steel upon steel, heavy, sudden blows, cries and groans—in fact, all the horrible din of a fierce hand-to-hand conflict.

Desert Dan's shot, the shot in the adjoining room, and the burst of battle outside, all came within the space of a few moments—so close together and so startling that Captain Sangre and the Indian at his side manifested greater surprise than Jean Ballé.

Glancing out at the door the outlaw saw his followers disappear from the porch, and turning, he left the room, followed by the Indian, neither of them daring to avenge the death of Gorilla-Hand.

"We've friends out here!" exclaimed Desert Dan to Jean Ballé, as he bounded past the old man and out at the door.

The recluse ran to the door and looked out. On the Plaza, in the moonlight, he saw a fierce and deadly conflict raging. Who the contestants were he knew not. He saw Indian against Indian, with white men and Mexicans surging to and fro. He saw the flash of weapons, swinging bludgeons and flying tomahawks. He heard cries, groans, curses and shouts, and in the midst of all he thought he saw the tall form and heard the voice of Old Kit Bandy urging on his friends and dealing deadly blows around him.

Thirty men at least were engaged in the conflict, and Jean Ballé knew none of them unless

the tall man he saw was Bandy. He did not know friend from foe. In fact, he did not know but what all the combatants, Kit and Desert Dan excepted, were his enemies fighting among themselves over the spoils of Paradise Vale.

Anxious to know the truth, and lend a helping hand if needed in expelling the invader from his door, the recluse went out upon the porch. He saw the villain, Captain Sangre, standing at the extreme left of the hacienda, swinging his hat and revolver and urging on his followers in the fierce combat.

With drawn sword the old man advanced upon the outlaw. The latter saw him coming, and leveling his revolver upon him, fired. With a groan Jean Ballé sunk heavily to the floor.

But scarcely had the old man fallen when Desert Dan rushed upon the outlaw chief and dealt him a furious blow upon the head with an Indian hatchet he had picked up on the ground, and laid the villain prostrate at the very feet of his own victim.

The conflict was in reality between Jaguar Head's little band of Apaches, and about one-half the force Captain Sangre had at Spring Basin. The odds were against Old Kit's followers, but it was a life or death struggle, and the Mescaleros fought like demons.

In the midst of the conflict Old Kit Bandy saw three men emerge from the shadows of the western bluff and come running toward the scene of battle. He heard a peculiar yell issue from the lips of one of them, and recognized it as the battle-cry of Old Rosycrusian—Tom Rattler, the Red River Epidemic!

Like a whirlwind the old hero of many a hand-to-hand conflict, and his two young companions, Mead and Warfield, rushed into the fight, and in a few minutes' time turned the tide of victory in favor of Jaguar Head's party. The outlaw band were routed, and leaving their dead and wounded—two-thirds of the number that had gone into battle—in the hands of the victors.

It had, however, been a dearly-bought victory. But three of Jaguar Head's Apaches had come out of the struggle unharmed. Ben Mead had received a painful wound, and Frank Warfield had been stricken senseless by a flying tomahawk, and for a while his life was despaired of.

Desert Dan had received a slight flesh wound in the arm that bled profusely, but gave him very little pain. As for Kit Bandy and Tom Rattler, the same Hand that had shielded them from all the perils of their adventuresome lives again carried them through this last conflict unharmed.

On the Plaza, in the very midst of the dead and dying, Old Kit and Tom clasped hands.

"Thomas," said Bandy, in deep and solemn earnestness, "your comin' was just in time to give us the victory."

"Ay, Kitsiel!" Tom replied, "I'm beginning to realize that I be the farmer o' the 'Sunday School Story'—alers handy in the field to rescue the boy from the brook."

Wholly ignorant of the presence of Jaguar Head and his band, that had been driven out of Spring Basin, in Paradise Vale, Captain Sangre, with some twenty men, had marched upon the home of Jean Ballé, determined to enforce his demands for the surrender of the secret he believed Ballé possessed.

But never was a villain more neatly thwarted, and that, too, by what seemed a providential combination of circumstances.

By mere accident had Bandy and his red friends, Tom Rattler and his friends, and Sangre and his gang struck Paradise Vale at the same time.

Old Tom, as soon as he had spoken with Kit, hastened to the assistance of his young friends. He found Ben Mead kneeling by the unconscious form of Frank Warfield, himself wounded, and at once assisted in removing Frank to the porch of the hacienda, where his wounds were dressed.

Jean Ballé was found where he had fallen—not dead, but desperately wounded. Near him, in a dazed condition, reclined Captain Sangre, bleeding at the nose and mouth and to all appearances unconscious of his condition or surroundings.

Most of the combatants had been killed outright in the hand-to-hand fight, but what few wounded there were Old Kit saw were cared for without regard to friends or foes.

Juan, the Scout, who had arrived on the battle-field about the time Rattler and his friends did, and Desert Dan took charge of the notorious Captain Sangre.

Kit Bandy assisted Jean Ballé into the house

and laid him upon a couch and proceeded to dress his wounds.

Suddenly, a wild, hysterical cry from the lips of Old Shady, the negress, called the old detective into an adjoining room, and there he found Lucille lying in a swoon, and but a few feet away lay the body of a dead outlaw. *But Zulita was not there!*

Old Kit quickly gave the alarm. Zulita was searched for in every nook and corner of the place, and Old Shady, weeping in distress, loudly called her name, but all in vain.

Meanwhile Lucille was restored to consciousness, and from her lips it was finally learned that during the battle two men had entered the room, that Zulita had shot one of them, but the other had seized the plucky girl and borne her away—leaving by the back door.

Despite their victory, Zulita had been spirited away a captive!

CHAPTER XXII.

DESERT DAN AGAIN IN HIS ELEMENT.

"SAVE Zulita! save my child!" was the imploring appeal of Jean Ballé to the old mountain detective.

The news of Zulita's disappearance seemed to turn the victory over the Desert Pirates into defeat, especially to the inmates of Jean Ballé's home.

None, however, felt more keenly the blow than Desert Dan. He held a short consultation with Tom Rattler.

"Lad," said the old hunter, "the gal's captor may still be in the valley yit. If so, we may head him off by hurryin' up to the entrance to the basin, 'specially if he is afoot. But once outside o' here and the pursuit will be a long one, for the murderous gang must have hosses near."

Without further delay they hastened down the valley to the entrance. They examined the sandy ground. They found horse-tracks coming into the valley but none going out.

Desert Dan's hopes revived. There was a possibility of Zulita's rescue. The captor had not escaped from the valley unless he had gone out afoot by scaling the environing bluffs.

The two secreted themselves in the shadows to wait and watch.

"Those hosses that have gone in here quite recently will be very apt to go out, and soon," said Desert Dan.

"Not unless we take 'em out, Dan'l," responded Tom. "The boys and I brought four hosses in here within the last two hours, and one o' them is your Black Robber."

"Great gingrickys! you don't say so!" exclaimed Dan, elated by the news.

"Yes," Tom said; "arter you war captered, and me and the boys rushed out into the sagebrush last night over in the desert, we became wanderin' pilgrims. We drifted here and there like a rudderless ship, and finally pulled up at Spring Basin whar the Desert Pirates war encamped. A little reconnoiterin' disclosed the fact that the varmints war havin' some trouble among themselves, and we three took advantage o' the fact to recover our hosses from the bandits' corral."

"Mountin' we flew to the desert again. As we war wanderin' 'round we heard a hoss whinnyin' off to our right. We rode that way and found Black Robber a prisoner. His draggin' lariat had caught on the root of a sagebrush, and he had walked around and around in a circle, windin' hisself up so's he had but three feet o' free rope."

"I put my hoss's bits in his mouth, and oh! Rosycrusians! how he did snort and rip the atmosphere; but he had to give in finally, and then Benja Mead backed the booger and rode him. I tell you, Black Robber are a lilly-lipped hummer, boy, and I'll bet he can fling sand in the eyes o' anything on the desert."

"But how came you here, Tom?" Dan asked.

"By accident, boy; we war not disposed to leave the vicinity o' Spring Basin until we knew the fate of Kit Bandy and yourself. So we stopped about daylight in a deep 'blowout,' and there under the broilin' sun we lay all day without food or water. At dusk this evenin' we mounted and struck out with the intention of circlin' 'round to Spring Basin and gettin' to the upper spring, and somethin' to eat, if we had to kill a hoss. On our swing we struck this valley, and findin' the entrance, rode in, watered ourselves and hosses at the spring right over there, then tied the critters whar they could graze a bit and went down the valley to investigate the light we saw. We got thar jist in time to hit that hornet-nest fight. Judas! boy, wasn't that a hummer! Didn't things fairly 'sizz'! Didn't Old Kit Bandy warp hisself

'round thar beautifully? Isn't he a velvet-throated, lilly-lipped hummer, though?"

"He is a brave, jolly and eccentric man," Dan responded; "but, Tom, I am glad to know Black Robber is near, although I may have lost my claim upon him."

"Wherefore is that whyfore, boy?" queried Old Tom; "the hoss is just as much yours as ever. You'll need him before you git outen—Ah, harkee! harkee, lad!"

The sound of galloping hoofs was heard coming up from the direction of the hacienda. Desert Dan cocked his rifle.

"Be careful, Dan'l!" cautioned Old Tom; "it may be a friend!"

A horseman soon came galloping into sight, and as he drew nearer, the watchers saw he was mounted upon a swift black horse, and held in his arms a burden.

"It's Zulita's captor! he has the girl!" exclaimed Old Tom.

Desert Dan made no reply, but bounded from his concealment and endeavored to seize the flying horse by the reins; but he was the merest fraction of an instant too late, and the horse tore past him so close that the rider's foot touched him.

"Escaped, by the great Rosycrusians!" burst from Old Tom's lips, as he saw the man dash out upon the desert with the struggling form of Zulita in his arms.

"And he was either on Black Robber or Jean Ballé's black, which is Robber's counterpart!" responded Dan.

"We can soon see," declared Tom, leading the way to where they had left their horses.

But they found Black Robber and the other horses where they had left them.

"We will follow, Tom—what say you?" exclaimed the boy.

"It's a go!"

They untied the horses. Tom's bits were still in Black Robber's mouth, and in a moment Dan was on the back of the stallion.

Old Rattler mounted the fleetest of the other three horses, and together the two rode out into the moonlight.

Refreshed by rest, water and an hour's grazing, Black Robber seemed as mettlesome as the day Desert Dan first mounted him in the canyon south of the Rio Hondo.

Up out of the emerald valley into the desert sprung the black with the Prince of the Saddle, and away like an arrow he shot, regardless of the iron bits—leaving Old Tom standing motionless on the plain.

"By the great Rosycrusians! Jack, we're not in it," said the old hunter, addressing his horse.

Then he gazed around him. A filmy line of dust hanging in the yellow moonlight marked the course the outlaw had taken, and along under this aerial trail Desert Dan was following swift and furious.

Once more was the Prince of the Saddle in his element—once more did the desert resound to the flying hoofs of Black Robber.

CHAPTER XXIII.

JEAN BALLÉ'S STORY.

THE abduction of Zulita gave her father more pain than his wounds, which Kit Bandy had pronounced, in his judgment, mortal. The thought of dying before he could see her was a bitter one indeed, and in spite of Old Kit's assurances that Desert Dan and Tom Rattler would be sure to bring her safely back, he worried and fretted himself into a burning fever, and as the night passed on, it became painfully evident that life with Jean Ballé would not extend far into another day. And this fact was clearer to none than to the old recluse himself.

But Old Kit Bandy, assisted by the noble youth, Ben Mead, himself wounded, attended by his bedside, and endeavored to cheer him up and prevent despondency from adding too greatly to his suffering.

Frank Warfield had recovered consciousness, and was resting quite well in an adjoining room, attended by Juan, the Scout, and old Jubal.

Captain Sangre lay on a cot on the porch securely bound, and watched over by an Apache—one of the four survivors of Old Kit's followers.

Along about midnight, Jean Ballé grew worse, and as Old Kit sat bathing his brow, he said:

"It's no use, Kit Bandy, my kind old friend. I have had a presentiment of this for some time. I expected it; but it's God's will, and He doeth all things right. I shall not complain. I have long been favored. But, poor

Zulita! Oh, that I could see her first—while my mind is clear!"

"Why, my dear sir, you talk as though you're goin' to die right off," said Bandy. "You're worth forty dead men yet, and if you'll brace up, I believe you'll pull through all right."

"Ah, Mr. Bandy," sighed the sick man, "you can't deceive me. I'm burning up with internal fever. But, Bandy, how strange it is that you and those outlaws should all happen here together at this time. Tell me things are not foreordained! God knows His plans, and carries them out, strange as they may sometimes seem."

"But, Kit Bandy," and the old man drew a long breath that seemed to give him momentary relief, "while my mind's clear, I want to have a talk with you. You've seen men die, and know that sometimes hours before death comes they become unconscious and pluck at the cover and stare wildly, and finally sink away."

"This will be the way I will go, but, while I know what I am saying, I want to help you clear up a mystery—the Mystery of the Black Arroyo Massacre."

Bandy started and leaned forward as if to catch every word.

"You needn't tell me that I'm not going to die," the old man went on, "for I know I am, and, for the benefit of my daughters after my death, I want to tell you some secrets."

"My name, I will first say, is not Jean Ballé, but Henri Montforte. I was born in New Orleans. My father was a Frenchman. I grew to manhood there, inherited my father's great wealth and finally married one of the fairest and most lovable women on earth. I idolized my wife. I lavished upon her and our home all that wealth and taste could procure. I, in my blind love, petted her to death."

"She died when our baby was only one year old. The blow nearly killed me, and for awhile I lay in the hospital with a dreadful fever of the brain. Some said I never would recover my reason, but I did, and was finally discharged from St. Luke's."

"But now, Kit Bandy, it fairly maddened me to enter my home, and I sold it. It nearly drove me wild to witness the happiness of other men and women, and I resolved to go away—fly into wildest scenes of the West and try and forget the past."

"With my baby and servants, Old Jubal and Shady, I moved to Texas and settled on a ranch. I soon discovered it was seclusion—wild seclusion I wanted, and again pulling up stakes I pushed over into New Mexico."

"By the merest accident I met a young Spaniard who told me of this little paradise in the desert. I paid him well to conduct me here. I fell in love with the place and resolved to make my home here and live in happy seclusion. I entered into a contract with the Spaniard by which he was to serve me as scout and agent—to bring supplies from the distant settlements and assist me in caring for such stock and vegetables as we could raise."

"As my offer for his services was a handsome one, he readily accepted, and we started back to Santa Fé, procured my child and servants, and struck for Paradise Vale. It was a long and tedious trip, but we finally reached here carrying our supplies upon pack-horses. Here for years have we dwelt in perfect peace, quiet and happiness. Juan, the Scout, has gone twice a year to points two and three hundred miles distant for clothing, cloth, books, food and other needed supplies which he brought here upon pack-animals by devious routes."

"The rest of the world has been too busy with its own affairs to ever follow him into this sand-waste, and in a few hours the drifting sand would forever conceal his trail. Here have my children grown almost to womanhood, never knowing want."

"I have educated them so far as it has been in my power, and I promised myself that when they were twenty I would take them where they could enjoy the pleasures and society of civilization. But some one else will have to do that now, Mr. Bandy, if they escape the perils of this dreadful night. But, Kit, one of those girls you met to-night is not my own daughter, and—"

"Ah, indeed!" cried Bandy, all his previous convictions coming back to him twofold stronger, "that girl came to you on the back of that black horse in your corral! Ben Mead, my boy, hearken! your father tied that child in a saddle on the back of that wild colt in hopes she might escape death or captivity! That child was your half-sister. One of the fair girls that are here, or were here, is your

blood kin, and— But, Mr. Ballé, pardon me for this interruption; go on."

"On our way here," continued the old man, "from the north, and when east of the Trinchera Mountains, a black horse, true enough, fell into our hands. Upon its back was a child asleep. She had been tied in the saddle, and was nearer dead than alive when we rescued her. She was too young to tell who she was or anything about herself or people."

"The poor young horse's shoulder was incrustated with blood. I found a gash thereon that had been closed with a pin. There was a hard substance like a flattened bullet under the skin below the wound. I made a new incision and removed the substance. It was a small gold locket. Inside the locket was a bit of closely-folded paper, upon which was written these words—but let me show you the paper itself. It has never been off my person in twelve years. Not one of my servants—not even my daughters—know the secret of that locket. I meant to tell them all some time. There it is—rather dim, but perhaps you can make it out. If not, I have it—every word—by heart."

He handed the bit of paper to Old Kit, who straightened it out and read as follows:

"BLACK ARROYO, EAST TRINCHERA MTS.
"We are surrounded by savages and must perish—have women and children and great amount of gold—my wife and friend Bond already killed—will tie my child Dolly in saddle on back of fast horse and send adrift in hopes she may be saved from captivity—if she escapes, whoever finds her and this, hope they will care for her—God will bless. Poor baby! * * * Later—wounded white man in Indian disguise just crawled into camp dying—says leader of savages is Don Alphonso de Muerta. My God! He's an old friend! * * * Still later—will close this now and send it and Dolly adrift on black colt—God help!
HORACE MEAD."

As Old Kit finished reading this aloud, he exclaimed:

"Carlita Bond's dying story to Captain Clarke was true!"

"Poor father!" sighed Ben Mead, with sad and heavy heart. "Oh, that I could avenge his death!"

"Then you are really the son of Horace Mead?" said Jean Ballé, laying his hand upon the bowed head of the boy.

"Yes, sir," Ben answered.

"Then you are the brother of my adopted daughter," the old man continued. "What a strange fatality brings you all here to-night."

"But you have not told Ben, Mr. Ballé," said Old Kit, "which of the two girls is his sister."

"Perhaps I had better not, for then he could be a brother to both. My poor child will need a good friend when I am gone."

"Mr. Ballé, as you have been a father to my sister, so will I be a brother to your daughter if anything should befall you," declared Ben Mead, with all the earnestness of his manly young heart.

"God bless you, boy!" said the old man; "but will you please call Lucille, Ben? Tell her I wish to see her."

Ben arose to go in search of the maiden, when the girl herself entered the room, white and trembling.

At sight of her Jean Ballé exclaimed:
"Ah! my child; you have heard what I have been saying; but I am glad you did. Lucille, this young man, Benjamin Mead, is your brother. You were the little waif that came to me lashed on the back of the colt—our Diamond Dick!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

A FRUITLESS RACE.

WITH his eyes upon that dust-line hanging in the moonlight, Desert Dan gave Black Robber the reins, and the miles flew to the rear as behind a bird on the wing.

Zulita's captor, mounted upon Diamond Dick, Jean Ballé's handsome black stallion, was out of sight before Dan had emerged from the valley, and, but for that dusky trail in the air, would not have known the course taken by the fleeing villain.

Black Robber gave all his wonderful strength and speed to the cause of his rider as long as he had free reins, but the moment he felt the pressure of the bits he showed a spirit of resentment.

This caused Dan some little trouble when he suddenly discovered that the dust-line he was following was falling away to his right, and undertook to veer the horse off in that direction; the animal resisted the interference with so much energy that before the boy could get him under way again he had lost sight of the aerial trail altogether.

This was a bitter disappointment to the Sad-

dle Prince. He knew not now whether he was really in pursuit of or riding from Zulita's abductor. He was certain of one thing, however: he was going in the direction of Spring Basin, whither he believed the outlaw was headed, and so he let the horse have his own way and his own gait, and thus sped on by the squatty sage-bushes and bristling cacti.

The boy had left Old Rattler so far behind at the very start that he no longer considered him as a companion in the chase.

Eagerly the boy watched before and around him, lying with his face almost touching the horse's mane, in hopes of again catching sight of the fugitive's trail. And, better than he had hoped for just then, he caught sight of a flying horse and rider coming down from the north, and headed so as to cross his path obliquely some distance ahead.

That it was the outlaw with Zulita he knew there could be no doubt, and so the chase was on again, not by "scent," as it were, but by sight. It was a race between the coveted black of the "Arroyo Massacre," and the famous black of the great range—the one long the docile servant of man, the other less than two days from the wild and unrestrained freedom of the boundless plain.

Nobly did Black Robber now behave himself, and swift upon the trail of the fugitive he held his way, as if conscious of a rivalry between himself and Diamond Dick that must now and forever be settled.

It was a noble race between noble horses, and Desert Dan hoped that his animal possessed an advantage in that it carried but a single burden and the weight of fewer years.

And, unless the moon as she mounted higher in the heavens seemingly brought objects nearer as they sped on, he finally became convinced that he was gaining upon the fugitive.

This gave the youth renewed hope, and he encouraged his horse in its noble efforts by kindly words.

Still on they went, and closer the pursuer seemed to draw to the fugitive.

Another mile, and all doubts were removed from Dan's mind. He was gaining rapidly upon the outlaw and his fair captive.

Not over twenty rods were between them when suddenly Dan saw a flash before him and heard a bullet whistle past his head mingled with the dull report of a pistol. The fugitive had discovered that he was being pursued, and gave notice of the fact.

But Desert Dan cared nothing for that. He drew his own revolver and urged Black Robber to a new burst of speed.

Then the distance between the two blacks rapidly closed, and finally Desert Dan called out:

"Halt there, you scoundrel!"

The only answer he received was a whistling bullet from the fugitive's revolver.

Still the Saddle Prince pressed him hard, fearing to fire lest he harm Zulita. He is so close now that he can see the horse is the black stallion of Paradise Vale—the same upon which Zulita was carried away.

"Hold or I will fire!" again shouted Dan.

Again the outlaw answered him by a shot. Dan raised his revolver and sent a bullet over the villain's head, but the fellow paid no attention to it.

Again the young desert-rider raised his weapon and fired straight at the fugitive's head. As the weapon rung out the outlaw was seen to reel forward and finally fall to the ground, his clinched fingers holding on to the rein and bringing the horse to a dead stand.

Then a cry of surprise burst from the lips of Desert Dan, and he grew sick at heart. *The outlaw was alone!* Living or dead, Zulita had been dropped somewhere upon the desert!

Dismounting, Dan advanced to release the reins of the riderless horse from the death-grip of his lifeless rider. The face of the villain was upturned in the moonlight. It was the face of the renegade leader, Swift-Wing.

One by one, and swift justice was being meted out to the notorious Desert Pirates.

Releasing Diamond Dick from the outlaw's grip, Dan tied up the reins and turned the animal loose, knowing he would find his way back to the vale.

But what next was Dan to do? Zulita was surely somewhere upon that desert, dead or alive. The villain, finding himself hard pressed—to lighten the burden of his horse—had undoubtedly dropped her unconscious on the plain. Had Dan passed by her silent form in his wild pursuit? or had the renegade dropped her at the time the boy had lost the trail?

Many were the thoughts that flashed in suc-

cession through the youth's excited brain, and he could arrive at nothing that seemed like a satisfactory solution of the mysterious whereabouts of Zulita.

By following the outlaw's trail back he might be able to find some clue to the missing girl, and as this was the only practical thing he could do, he at once set off, leading his horse, Diamond Dick following patiently behind.

The tracks of Diamond Dick were quite easily followed in the yielding sand, but the lad's progress was painfully slow. However, he trudged on hopeful and determined.

He had thus gone perhaps a mile when his horse suddenly pricked up its ears in a way that manifested alarm.

Dan stopped and gazed around him. He discovered a horseman riding toward him from the north. He drew his revolver. It might be an outlaw with Zulita.

The horseman came on, and stopped when about fifty yards away. To Dan he looked like Tom Rattler. He called to him. It was Old Tom.

In a moment the two were together.

"The gal, Dan'l—where is she?" were the first words spoken.

"God only knows, Tom," was Dan's answer.

"Great Rosycrusians! didn't you overhaul the thief?"

"And slew him; but he had no Zulita. Surely, Tom, we were not mistaken in seeing him have the girl in his arms as he rode out of Paradise Vale."

"Mistaken? no! the varlet has dropped her on the plain to save his own bacon. Did you have him in sight all the way?—follow his trail right along?"

"No; I lost sight of his trail, or rather the line of dust that hung on the air, for quite awhile. My horse gave me trouble."

"Wal, we'll foller the varmint's trail on back," said Old Tom, "but, lad, be prepared for anything."

"To find Zulita dead?" the boy almost gasped.

Old Tom made no response, but turning his horse's head northward, began retracing his footsteps.

CHAPTER XXV.

ANOTHER HARD HIT.

In a deep bowl-like sink or "blow-out" in the desert, about two miles southwest of Paradise Vale, twenty horses, bridled and saddled, were grouped together and watched over by two armed men.

They were horses that belonged to the Desert Pirates. They had been left there about dusk while all the outlaws, but the two, had stolen away on foot across the desert to Paradise Vale.

Of the result of their visit to the home of Jean Ballé the reader already knows. The two men left to guard the horses heard the sound of battle from where they were concealed, and were greatly surprised thereby, for no conflict had been expected. The scout who had discovered the vale had reported but three men therein. He had also reported the discovery of a black stallion there that was the counterpart of Black Robber; and it was this horse, and if the right one, the secret of the Trinchera Mines, that had taken Captain Sangre to the valley.

Nearly two hours had passed after the din of battle had died away, when the two waiting outlaws in the blow-out were suddenly aroused by the sound of flying hoofs.

Going to the top of the sink they saw a horse man approaching them at a gallop, and as he came nearer he waved them the signal of friendship.

On the rim of the basin he drew rein. In his arms he held a human form. The men recognized him as their friend, Swift-Wing.

"Here, Keeler and Blaze," the horseman quickly said, "take this girl and take care of her. She has fainted. I must go on. I am being pursued and must draw the attention of the enemy away from here until the men get in. If we lose those horses we're left afoot in the desert. I have here the black horse we've so long been huntin' for. Guard well that girl. We'll get for her the ransom of a queen."

"But what was all that shootin' about, Swift?" asked the man "Blaze."

"We'd a devil of a fight," Swift-Wing answered; "Jaguar Head and them Sunday-school Apaches o' his war there and met us at the very door of that recluse's house. I don't know how it ended, but I suppose all right, of course. I was assigned the task of getting away with this horse and this girl, and I succeeded. But I expect several o' the band got hit hard."

One of the outlaws lifted the inanimate form of Zulita from the arms of the renegade and

carried her down into the basin and laid her upon a blanket.

Swift-Wing was greatly excited, and after a few more words, turned and doubled back upon his trail until he caught sight of his pursuer, then he veered off to the right and bore away toward the southwest, and thus was Desert Dan thrown off that part of the trail that led to the basin where Zulita had been left.

Zulita soon recovered from her swoon, and sitting up she regarded her situation with surprise and bewilderment. The outlaws were very kind to her, her pretty, innocent, girlish face appealing to their better natures.

Patiently the two guards awaited for some further news from the hidden valley. The hours went by. The moon drifted up toward the zenith. About midnight they saw a single person slowly coming toward the blow-out from the direction of the valley. Blaze challenged him as he came up. He was a comrade—one of the party that had gone on the raid to Paradise Vale. His face and clothing were covered with blood. He was a sorrowful-looking object.

"Good God, 'Pecos' Smith!" exclaimed Keeler, "what has happened?"

"Death and destruction!" was "Pecos's" response.

"What do you mean?" demanded Keeler.

"I mean just what I say," Pecos answered; "the expedition reached the little valley o' Paradise all right, and lined up in royal shape before the stranger's 'dobie'; but alas! the valley was swarmin' with devils. They attacked us in front, in the rear, on the sides, from above and below—hundreds of the hot-eyed, fiery-mouthed demonz—some with two heads and a dozen hands, every one of which wielded a weapon. Just how many of the band escaped—whether any besides myself, indeed—I don't know."

"Swift-Wing escaped, for he was here," said Keeler, "and brought a prisoner—a young girl that he left with us. He was mounted on that black stallion, and said it war the one we war after. But Swift war fearfully excited—Ah! there comes another of our men! This straggling in singly tells of defeat itself."

The second man came up sad and dejected. He told about the same story as Pecos Smith.

The third man finally straggled in from the fatal valley. He had seen Captain Sangre fall. He had recognized old Jaguar Head in the fight. They had been defeated. More than this he could not tell.

Zulita took courage from what she overheard. That the Desert Pirates had been defeated there was no doubt, but how her friends had fared in the struggle she knew not.

The moon crossed the zenith and went slowly swinging down the western sky.

Uneasily the outlaws paced to and fro, watching off toward the hidden valley for returning comrades. They were afraid to depart lest others, wounded, might come in and perish for want of assistance.

Finally the east began to redden with morning dawn, and the five outlaws began active preparations for departure.

They were nearly ready to mount. The horses were all untied and so many assigned to each man, when suddenly a cry of rage was heard to come from the west side of the blow-out, and glancing in that direction, the outlaws, and Zulita also, saw two forms on the edge of the basin, swaying to and fro in a hand-to-hand struggle, plainly outlined against the sky.

That one of the two was a friend and comrade the outlaws had no doubt, and were in the act of going to his assistance when the combatants toppled over into the basin and came whirling in rapid evolutions down the slope directly toward the awe-stricken freebooters.

Almost at the very feet of the five men the combatants came to a stand, and then, as if by magic, both of them sprung to their feet, stepped apart, threw up their hands in which were grasped revolvers, and began pouring a deadly fire into the very faces of the astonished outlaws.

Three of the men went down in their tracks, and the other two undertook to dodge among the horses, but the animals themselves had become frightened, a panic ensued, and the whole mount fled precipitately out of the blow-out, trampling beneath their feet the two remaining outlaws.

Zulita, too, had become frightened, and would have been trampled to death had one of the two men not seized and dragged her back almost from under the trampling hoofs, saying as he did so:

"Zulita, fear not!"

The girl looked up into the speaker's face. A

cry burst from her lips. She threw her arms about his neck and sunk almost fainting upon his breast. It was Desert Dan, the Prince of the Saddle, that had rescued her!

And flying to and fro like a bug on a hot grid-dle was Old Tom Rattler, determined that no outlaw should escape if he could help it.

Finally when he discovered that the blow-out held no living foe, he waltzed around and received an introduction to the smiling, weeping Zulita.

"Great Rosycrusians!" were his first words, "and this is Zulita, the waif o' the night—fairy o' the desert, I've hearn Dan'l here talkin' 'bout so much. And I don't blame ye, Dan'l, a bit for worryin' a little. If I war a century younger and as big fool as Old Kit Bandy 'bout weemin, I'd cut you outen this gal or snap a tug. But, jokin' aside, didn't we foolish them pirates nobby, beauchifully?"

"It was a complete surprise to all of us," replied Zulita.

"Yes, I observed that you got a bit skart and swarmed away," Old Tom observed, "but I think the coast's clear now o' danger. We've been maneuverin' all night to rescue you, and have had an eye on ye here for 'bout two hours tryin' to hit a scheme to rescue you and at the same time preserve our own bacon. Finally Dan'l's tricky brain suggested that we git a-fightin' and roll into the pit with horns locked—hop up, and—well, you know the rest—see'd how the trick worked?"

"It was a very clever scheme," Zulita declared; "and I thank you with all my heart for all the trouble you have been to on my account. But can you tell me whether my father and friends are safe?"

"Your father," answered Dan, "received a slight wound in the fight, but the Desert Pirates were routed and Captain Sangre wounded and made prisoner."

"Poor father! I hope he is not worrying about me," Zulita said; "but, Dan, what became of that strange, funny old man—"

"Old Kit Bandy?" interrupted Old Tom.

"Yes, sir."

"Old Kit Bandy," Rattler answered, "is on the turf there happy and smiling—the biggest liar, the voluminousest old fraud and best double-action fighter in New Mexico. Kit's a daisy—a lilly-lipped hummer, and I love him as a long-lost brother. But I'll tell you all 'bout Old Kit, gal, some other time, for he's a hull anecdote. We'd better be gittin' away off this desert afore the sun comes up and broils us. Come, children."

So saying he led the way to where they had left Black Robber, Diamond Dick and his own horse hitched among the sage-bushes.

Zulita was mounted upon her father's noble black, and then the three rode away through the morning's crimson dawn in the direction of Paradise Vale.

CHAPTER XXVI.

CAPTAIN SANGRE THROWS ON SOME LIGHT.

WE left Jean Ballé's bedside just as he had introduced Ben Mead and his sister, Lucille, to each other.

It was the first time the brother and sister ever met. In fact, the first Lucille knew of her being an adopted child, was when she had heard Jean Ballé's story. It was a startling surprise to the girl to learn that the good man, Jean Ballé, was not her father, and brought to her young heart a deep and painful regret, but the loss of him as her father was in a measure compensated by gaining brave and handsome Ben Mead as a brother.

Ben briefly told Lucille about the death of his mother, and of his father going to Santa Fé, where in a year or two he married a lady whose mother was a Spaniard. That new mother Ben had never seen nor the sister born in the second marriage. His father had written to him and told him of his step-mother, and when "Dolly" was born he wrote of that event.

Finally news reached him of the massacre of his father, mother and sister, and he knew none of the particulars of that massacre until Captain Rufus Clarke, an old friend of his father's, had written him to come at once to New Mexico and aid in investigating the dying confession of one Carlita Bond—a confession which, if certain facts could be established or evidence found, would bring to justice his father's murderer and perhaps restore to him a sister.

The sister he had now found, but, so far as he knew, his father's murderer was still at large.

Jean Ballé witnessed the meeting of the brother and sister with no little degree of pleasure, and after awhile he said, with a voice full of emotion:

"God bless you, my children! Oh, that my child, Zulita, was here! Then I could die happy!"

"Desert Dan and Tom Rattler are in search o' her," said Old Kit, "and, my word for it, if Old Tom ever comes back, the gal'll be with him."

"Ha! ha! ha!" suddenly came a hoarse, mocking laugh from the porch to the ears of Jean Ballé and his friends.

It came from the lips of Captain Sangre, who was lying so near the open door as to be able to hear all said within.

"You'll laugh outen t'other side of your mouth, pardner, before another week," said Old Kit, walking to the door and looking down upon the wounded outlaw.

"Oh, I expect that, old man," coolly responded the villain; "and it all comes of my not shooting Jaguar Head on sight in Spring Basin night before last. I always mistrusted you were a fraud, and tried to convince the reservation Apaches of the fact, but your devilish cunning was all-powerful."

"But now that the secret of the Black Arroyo Massacre is known to so many, I want to throw a little light on that affair, since Horace Mead's message, as I heard it read, says nothing whatever about the much-talked-of Trinchera gold-mine."

"That gold-mine," the villain went on, like one slightly delirious, "is what we were strikin' for. I had no desire to harm Jean Ballé and his family, and if he had given me the contents of Horace Mead's message as sent out upon the black horse, no blood would have been shed."

"Hualpa José heard Carlita Bond's dying story, for he was Captain Clarke's guide. But he must have lied about her saying aught of Mead giving directions by which the Trinchera mine could be found. Hualpa José, I now see, has deceived me, and no telling how many more."

"He has the face and tongue of a saint and the heart of a devil. He was one of Muerta's band that butchered Horace Mead and his party. He was Captain Clarke's guide when Carlita Bond told her story. He deserted the captain that same night and started out to peddle her secret. I paid him well for it, and it has proven a boughten curse. Captain Clarke put Kit Bandy in the field, and I know not but Hualpa José has a party out also."

"Naturally enough, I settled upon the famous Black Robber as being the horse that had escaped with the secrets of the Arroyo Massacre locked up in his shoulder, and sent Swift-Wing with most of my band to capture the horse."

"Meanwhile, as Jacarilla Jim, the Scout, I endeavored to watch the movements of Captain Clarke, so that if he got hold of the secret before I did, I could be ready to deprive him of it instant. I succeeded in gaining his confidence to the extent of his recommending me as guide to conduct Ben Mead across the desert from Bonito Camp in the Sacramento Mountains to the Rio Hondo, when that young gentleman should arrive."

"But Mead and his companion concluded they'd rather have Tom Rattler as guide, because they'd read a story once about his wonderful achievements, and they got him."

"That left Jacarilla Jim sitting, and so I gathered up the remnants of my band and struck into the desert, determined to trap the young smarties and their blood-and-thunder idol at Spring Basin. I did not expect to run up against Old Jaguar Head and his Sunday-school class there. But I did, and there's where my first mistake occurred. I'd ought to have had the renegade and his class shot on sight."

"Captain Sangre," said Ben Mead coming to the door, "would you mind telling me, if you know, what took Captain Clarke away from Camp Bonito so sudden?"

"Certainly not, boy," the outlaw chief responded in an apparently happy mood.

"Captain Clarke left Camp Bonito with a little lizard-face man named Ichabod Flea, for Aztec Ranch on the Rio Hondo. Just what they were in such a hurry about I don't know, but I mistrusted Clarke was endeavoring to run Hualpa José down. It was intimated that that Ichabod Flea was a detective, but, if he is, he is used like a ferret to run the rats out of their holes."

A broad smile passed over Bandy's face at this allusion to his little partner, Ichabod Flea, but no one noticed it.

Returning to the bedside of Jean Ballé, Ben Mead seated himself and for some minutes gave way to reflections.

Jean Ballé fully realized his condition—that he must die, and prayed fervently that he might see Zulita again before he passed away.

"Ben, he finally said, 'I believe you are an honest, manly young man. You have promised to be a brother to my soon-to-be orphan child, and I now, in the presence of these witnesses and Almighty God, intrust her to your care and protection should she be rescued alive.'"

"And I will be her sister so long as my life is spared, father," declared Lucille.

In his possession the old man had bonds and securities of wealthy Eastern corporations to the amount of many thousand dollars upon which no interest had been realized for a long period of years. Out of this he wanted his faithful servants, Old Jubal and Shady, provided a comfortable home. Juan, the scout, was to have a handsome sum, and the rest was to go to the education and support of Zulita and Lucille.

That night was a long and dreadful one in Paradise Vale—especially to the wounded and suffering—a number of whom died before morning. And the strangest and most surprising thing of all was to find Captain Sangre silent in death when all supposed the outlaw simply sleeping.

He had died without a murmur or complaint. When his wounds were dressed they were not even considered dangerous, and so after all his evil life, the great villain died game.

Jean Ballé was still alive at daybreak and struggling bravely against death in hopes of seeing Zulita, who was still absent. And his hopes were realized, for the sun was just coming up when Desert Dan and Tom Rattler rode up to the hacienda with Zulita alive and well.

The maiden was at once conducted to the bedside of her dying father, and now we will leave it for the reader to imagine that parting of father and child—that death-bed scene. Our pen cannot describe it, nor can one conceive the anguish of mind and the choking agony of heart that Zulita and Lucille suffered, unless he has passed through the same ordeal.

About noon that day the spirit of Henri Montforte passed away to seek the companionship of that sweet spirit that for years had waited his coming on the other shore, and the hearts of all in Paradise Vale were sad with sorrow and vailed in mourning.

CHAPTER XXVII.

FAREWELL, PARADISE VALE.

EARLY one morning, just three weeks after the death of Jean Ballé, a party of twelve persons rode out of Paradise Vale and headed northward across the desert. At the head of the party rode Juan, the scout, and Kit Bandy. Behind came Tom Rattler and Ben Mead, Desert Dan and Lucille Montforte, Frank Warfield and Zulita Mead, and Old Jubal and Shady.

The party had bid farewell to the lovely little oasis and all its associations, and headed for civilization. They would have departed sooner but for Frank Warfield's wounds, but not until the brave youth had fully recovered would Kit Bandy hear to his undertaking the journey across the desert.

The objective point of the party was Cedar-Bend Ranch on the Rio Hondo, and as the journey was unattended with any incident worthy of note we will not attempt to give the dry details of that long ride. Suffice it to say that they arrived safely at the ranch on the evening of the third day and were welcomed to the place with all the hospitality characteristic of the ranchman.

Desert Dan became the lion of the party, for he proudly rode into the ranch on Black Robber—the wild horse that had defied the most skillful rancheros in the Southwest.

He had not been there an hour before Mr. Brown, one of the proprietors of the ranch, offered him five hundred dollars for the horse. Dan smiled and said:

"Don de Vaca sent north for me to come down and catch the horse for him. I am to have a thousand dollars."

"But you'll not get it of him now, Dan," said Brown.

"Why not?"

"Don de Vaca is dead. Hadn't you heard of his death?"

"I have been in the desert over three weeks. I have heard nothing," the boy replied.

"Well, De Vaca is dead, sure. His hot Spanish blood got him into a quarrel with one Hualpa José about some old meanness of theirs years ago, and they came to blows and shots and laid each other out."

"Horn o' Joshua!" exclaimed Old Kit, who had heard this story, "dollars to dimes, Ben Mead, De Vaca is the treacherous Muerta, who led the savages and outlaws in the Black Arroyo massacre. But Cap Clark and Ichabod Flea are up there, or should be—"

"They are there," said Brown; "I just came down from Aztec Ranch to-day."

"How far is it there?"

"Ten miles, only. If you wish to see those gentlemen, I'll send for them to-night."

"I'd like to see 'em, Mr. Brown, very much, if it's not taxin' your kindness too heavily."

Captain Clarke and Ichabod Flea were sent for, and arrived at Cedar Bend the next morning.

The meeting of the friends was a happy one, and the story Old Kit had to relate to Clarke and Ichabod fairly delighted the captain. The only exception was the surprising revelation of Jacarilla Jim being Captain Sangre, the leader of the Desert Pirates.

"The whole matter, then, is settled," Captain Clarke said, when Bandy had finished his narrative, "for Hualpa José and Don Alvar de Vaca got into a shooting-match, using each other as targets, and Hualpa and Don Alvar are no more. Before Hualpa died, he admitted that he had sold the secret of Carlita Bond's story to Captain Sangre, and then reminded De Vaca that he was the leader, Muerta, in the Arroyo Massacre, and demanded hush-money. To be sure the Don has been leading an honest life of late years and making money, and he didn't want to be disturbed by Hualpa, who was a participant in the massacre himself, hence the shooting. Hualpa also told me why Muerta, alias De Vaca, had sought to murder Horace Mead and his family and friends. Muerta had loved the woman Mead married, and it was his blind Spanish jealousy that led to the murder. When the villain heard of Carlita Bond's story, he became uneasy, and thought if he could get hold of Horace Mead's message, he could defy me and justice. Like all the rest, he concluded Black Robber must be the black colt sent adrift with the secret locked up in its shoulder, and so brought Desert Dan down here to catch the wild horse."

"And all the time," added Old Kit, "the black colt, the message and the child, 'Dolly,' have been quietly reposing in Paradise Vale with the recluse, Jean Ballé. The story of there being a 'key' to the Trinchera gold mine was all a hoax."

The party remained but a day or two at Cedar Bend Ranch, and then, accompanied by Captain Clarke, pushed on northward to Santa Fé. Here the little band's ways began to diverge. Ben Mead, with his sister and Zulita, and old Jubal and Shady, went East to his old home.

Desert Dan, the Prince of the Saddle, accompanied by Juan, the Scout, went back to the northern ranges, while Old Kit Bandy and pard and Tom Rattler pushed out into the hills in quest of whatever in the way of adventure and glory was offered them.

Five years since the parting at Santa Fé. In one of the richest valleys of California there is a horse-ranch known as the Big-Three Ranch. The owners of that ranch are Desert Dan, Ben Mead and Frank Warfield, and at the head of the drove of fast horses is Black Robber, the famous wild stallion of the great Rio Hondo plains.

There have been some remarkable changes in the lives of those young men since we parted with them at that quaint old New Mexican town. All three are married to estimable and charming women.

Ben Mead found his wife in his native State. Desert Dan and Frank Warfield first met theirs in Paradise Vale.

The fair Zulita is Mrs. Warfield.

Lucille is Mrs. "Desert" Dan.

All six are living at Big-Three Ranch, and all are happy.

And there, in their full enjoyment of life, we will leave them.

THE END.

NEXT HALF-DIME LIBRARY,

No. 940,

Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Shake-up:

OR,

Tulip Tilly's Trump Hand.

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER.